

Toward Conceptual and Theoretical Contribution to International Relations and U.S Foreign Policy Schools of Thought: The Donald Trump ‘America First’ Foreign Policy and Impact on Democracy and Democratization Process

Abstract

The Trump presidency has come to an end, but academic debate on his ‘America First’ foreign policy is still in full swing. Academics who engage the subject either disagree that Trump developed a distinct foreign policy or agree that he did. Those who agree that he did, still disagree on the type and impact. Thus, the three key academic questions that underpin the Trump ‘America First’ foreign policy are: 1) How do we conceptualize the Trump ‘America First’ foreign policy? 2) What impact does it have on democracy and democratization? 3) How do state and non-state actors of democracy promotion respond effectively to this impact? This research makes conceptual and theoretical contribution to U.S foreign policy schools of thought and International Relations. It identifies five patterns in the Trump policy that provides the theoretically backed basis for re-conceptualization; 1) Pattern against international system/multilateral institutions; 2) Unilateral pattern; 3) Pattern against pro-democracy leaders; 4) Pro-Putin pattern; and 5) nick-naming/populist pattern. The study argues that a U.S foreign policy that displaces U.S stewardship of the international system and replaces the two main pillars of liberalism; multilateralism and globalism, with unilateralism and Americanism creates the conditions for global waves of autocratization and anarchy.

Keywords: ‘America First’, Foreign Policy, Democracy, Democratization, Rationalism, Constructivism

Introduction

Donald Trump is the first U.S president with neither prior experience in public service nor military. Foreign policy analysts therefore waited for his foreign policy with the level of curiosity we never saw before in U.S foreign policy history.

As Trump delivered his inauguration speech, the leitmotiv running at full length was: ‘*America first!*’ and ‘*Make America Great Again.*’ ‘America First’ is traceable to anti-interventionist Americans of the war years (Calamur, 2017:1) while the MAGA slogan was first used by Ronald Reagan during and after his 1980 presidential campaign (Martosko & David, 2015: 12). Trump trademarked the slogan and used it in both his presidential campaign and National Interest Review: ‘*America First will be the overriding feature of my presidency*’ (Trump’s National Interest Review, April 17 2016). By ‘America First’ he explained he would guarantee U.S national security by defeating Islamic terrorism and safeguard U.S jobs for U.S citizens. He emphasized his readiness to abandon external nation-building, nicknaming U.S allies ‘*free riders*’ (Posen, 2018:1). He explained his vision for the American people also in his speech at the APEC CEO Summit in Da Nang, Vietnam in November 2017 with a quote from The Wizard of Oz: ‘*There’s no place like home.*’ Then, in the course of shedding light on his foreign policy and grand strategy, prompted by the question of New York Time’s David Sanger, Trump emphasized he had a foreign policy which he boiled down to two important words; ‘America First’. He then said he was ‘not isolationist’ by being ‘America First’ (Rothman, 2016). His claim of having a foreign policy has often emerged as the key defense for scholars who agree that Trump constructed a distinct foreign policy.

The question then is; in ‘America First’ foreign policy, has Trump developed a distinct foreign policy much like the Monroe Doctrine, the Truman Doctrine, the Reagan Doctrine, and the Bush Doctrine? Is the foreign policy worthy of recognition in International Relations discipline as a foreign policy school of thought much like the four thematic domains of U.S foreign policy; Jeffersonism, Jacksonism, Hamiltonism and Wilsonism? How do we conceptualize that type of foreign policy? Is the Trump ‘America First’ foreign policy ‘a combination of other foreign policy principles? Is it the resurgence of Jacksonism (Dimitrova,

2017)? Is it neo-isolationism (Applebaum, 2016)? Is it unpredictability doctrine (Fuchs, 2017; Learner, 2021; Bentley & David, 2021:21; Bentley & Lerner, 2022)? Is it principled realism (Kirkey, 2018; Ettinger, 2020)? Does it have any parallels with Nixon's Mad Man Theory (Krauthammer, 2017; Sciutto, 2020; Boys, 2021, Turner & Kaarbo, 2021)? Did Trump demonstrate to be a prime example of a low conceptual complexity leader (Hassan & Featherstone, 2021: 3-4)? Did Trump displace America as global leader with such foreign policy (Zakaria, 2017; Tisdall 2017), scoring F in democracy (Ben-Ghiat, 2018) and helping authoritarians against democracy promotion (Berman, 2018)? How might state and non-state actors of democracy promotion effectively overcome the challenges of democracy and democratization?

To answer the questions raised, this study begins with introductory hypotheses. First, the iconization of American Presidents as world's most powerful men (Singh, 2006:28) implies that Trump must have had some kind of impact on the international. The presidential impact of U.S Presidents is felt through foreign policy historically (Maidment & McGrew, 1991:74, 83). This suggests that Trump is likely not an exception. Secondly, the U.S is the most powerful nation-state, even though this is being hotly debated amidst the era of groupism (Wallerstein, 1995: 6 -7). Yet, it is likely for the president of the most powerful nation-state to possess foreign policy aptitude. Furthermore, the U.S enjoys the membership and stewardship of the international system and organizations such as the UN, WTO, IMF, WB, and NATO (Munkler, 2007: 146 – 147). These organizations serve the interest of the liberal international order to achieve some of its foreign policy objectives (Ikenberry 2018). Hence, any U.S foreign policy that seeks the withdrawal of the U.S from key global accords could be considered different from past U.S foreign policy doctrines.

Following on from the introductory hypotheses, the study then attempts a re-conceptualization. It begins with Rosen and Ross (1996:5-6) conceptual framework and the arguments of rationalists and constructivists on the international system/institution and the actorness of rational actors. It touches upon some of Trump's key executive orders and presidential actions to establish the difference between the four thematic domains of U.S foreign policy schools of thought and the Trump foreign policy. It then refers to some of Trump's executive orders and presidential actions to pinpoint some of the impacts on

democracy and democratization.

What is 'America First' Foreign Policy? The Conceptual Conflicts

How do academics and foreign policy analysts understand and interpret the Trump America First foreign policy? Richard Haass in his; *A World in Disarray: American Foreign Policy and the Crisis of the Old Order* argued he was skeptical of a certain Trump doctrine. He was not alone. His communication minister – Mike Pompeo earlier claimed there is no Trump doctrine. Some assume that Trump lacks the aptitude to develop a distinct and coherent foreign policy. Even his economic policy, one claim — the policy area he apparently triumphed, his tax approach to the corporate sector proved a poor decision (Elliot, 2021). He would go on to lose the 2020 election by over 7 million votes on some of these accounts (Busch & Pitney Jr 2021).

Some scholars especially Fuchs discussed Trump's erratic behavior as a mode of foreign policy doctrine termed '*unpredictability doctrine*' (Bentley & Lerner, 2021). Bentley and Lerner engaged the editors of the *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* on this issue in October 2019. Proponents of the concept whom are mostly Trump's defenders argued it was Trump's approach to force U.S allies and adversaries not to take U.S largesse for granted (Krauthammer, 2017). Critics however warned it would make international politics more chaotic, destabilize U.S vital relations, and disrupt the US-led liberal international order (Nedal & Nexon 2017; Saletan 2016). However, the question is; is unpredictability an epistemologically coherent approach to foreign policy formulation, or is it simply a *post hoc* rationalization for inspired policy-formulation (Bentley & David, 2021)? Is there a detailed account of unpredictability in Trump's 'America First' foreign policy? Is unpredictability in Trump's presidential actions if any (1) a feature—the product of a distinct and well thought out application of grand strategy equally shared by his allies and supporters, (Lerner, 2021:2), or (2) a bug—the result of Trump's inconsistencies (Bentley & David 2021)? Did Trump coherently formulate and execute the doctrine of unpredictability or was he simply unpredictable because he was inconsistent (Hassan & Featherstone 2021:7)?

In response to these questions, Lerner introduced the notion of doctrine. He argued that

a doctrine is not simply an account of a president's foreign policy programme, 'but instead a discursive outcome of interpretation alongside presidential statements articulating the rationales of actions (2021:14). Monroe articulated his 'Monroe Doctrine' to the Congress (Gilderhus, 2006). Lerner (2021:2) also demonstrated how Trump's supporters drew parallels between Trump's foreign policy and 'Nixon's 'Madman Theory.' He then applied the parallels to label Trump's policy '*a savvy doctrine*'.

Bentley & David (2021:16) agrees with Lerner. However, the academics contrast Nixon's pretended 'craziness' which was understood to be '*the action of a rational actor motivated by rational aims*', with Trump's unpredictability, that was '*frequently framed in contrast to the rational actor*'. Hassan and Featherstone (2021) disagree with Lerner; Bentley and David. They assumed that unpredictability in Trump's foreign policy emerged from Trump's *low conceptual complexity* and not from any kind of coherent doctrine; '*There was no causal conviction to a doctrine*', Hassan and Featherstone wrote, '*but there was the outcome of unpredictability due to the ad hoc and ill-informed nature of policy-making within the Trump presidency*' (Hassan & Featherstone 2021:19–20). Trump did not consistently communicate in speeches and documents justifying his key actions (Hassan & Featherstone, 2021:7). Hassan and Featherstone instead are in support of a through line between Trump's foreign policy rhetoric and actions – '*low conceptual complexity*' involving *differentiation* and *integration* (2021:3-4).

Krauthammer (2017) and Sciutto (2020) on the other hand drew parallels between Trump's unpredictability and Nixon's 'Madman Theory'. The Madman Theory sought to persuade adversaries that Nixon was an erratic political actor, and that concessions were the sole option of stopping unpredictable American measures. Boys (2021:14-16) drew same parallels. He drew upon some comparative historical analyses to explore the impact of unpredictability on U.S grand strategy during both presidencies. He then argued that Trump's unpredictability constitutes a kind of foreign policy. Turner & Kaarbo (2021) drew same parallels, but drawing upon political psychological literature. They identified what they termed Trump's *impulsivity*, *emotionality* and *provocative rhetoric towards China* as with Nixon towards Vietnam. There are other scholars who agree that Trump developed a distinct foreign policy, but refute unpredictability. Dimitrova (2017) for instance argued

that Trump constructed a Jacksonian foreign policy. Appaubaum (2019) claimed that Trump ran a neo-isolationist foreign policy. Nevertheless, Trump said; *'I am not isolationist'*. *'I am America First'*. This implies that Trump does not consider these two to be the same.

In 'America First' Foreign Policy: Did Trump Construct a Distinct Foreign Policy Doctrine?

To answer this question, we need epistemological and conventional look into what foreign policy, doctrine and grand strategy are. What is a foreign policy? What is a grand strategy? What is a doctrine? Is foreign policy the diplomatic principles and framework that guide and shape governments' external relationships? Is a doctrine an account of a president's foreign policy programme, with a discursive outcome of interpretation articulating the rationales of actions (2021:14)? Is a grand strategy the full range of goals that a pursue (Art, 2003:2), and concentrates essentially on how a state should employ its instrument in the realization of its foreign policy goals? What are the characteristics of foreign policy, grand strategy and doctrine? Are foreign policy doctrines and grand strategies visionary, prescriptive and evolutionary (Art, 2003)? Are they coherent roadmap communicating U.S vision, role on the international space, key goals, as well as the most effective instrument for actualizing them (Schwenninger, 2003:25)? The big question is whether the Trump 'America First' foreign policy accommodates all of these characteristics, and if it is the idealization and construction of Trump.

Posen and Ross illustrate the constituents of a well-defined grand strategy: 1) the clear identification of U.S interests and objectives; 2) the threats to those interests and objectives; 3) the appropriate strategic responses to those threats; and 4) the principles that should guide the construction of U.S policy and strategy (1996:5-6). A grand strategy is constructed to respond to specific crises that threaten American national interests. This is the case with every coherent and well-defined doctrines such as the Reagan doctrine that responded effectively to Communist expansionism, the successful containment strategy of the Truman doctrine, the Bush doctrine developed to respond to the 9/11 anti-American terrorism etc.

The next thing is to explore the four thematic domains of the U.S foreign policy schools of

thought to be able to answer the question of whether or not the Trump foreign policy is any different.

In tracing the origins of U.S foreign policy, Walter Russell Mead in his; *Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How It Changed the World*, outlined the four thematic domains of the U.S foreign policy; Jeffersonism, Hamiltonism, Jacksonism, and Wilsonism (2001). These four thematic themes of the U.S foreign policy have often defined the ideologies and political actions of U.S presidents since the beginning of the last century at least:

Thomas Jefferson focused on the preservation of democracy and avoidance of war, particularly in war-torn Europe (Paterson 2018). Trump is different as he refrained from nation-building and democracy promotion (Posen, 2018). Alexander Hamilton focused on the promotion of free international trade and global economy (Schroeder 1997). Trump is different. On March 1 2018, he imposed 25% tariff on Canadian steel and 10% tariff on aluminum, as to many countries. Andrew Jackson prioritized U.S national interest and advocated for a powerful U.S military (Hall 2017). Some scholars including Dimitrova (2017) assumed that the Trump America First foreign policy '*is the resurgence of the Jacksonian tradition*'. However, even though parallels could be drawn between Trumps' executive orders on '*re-building the U.S military*' and Jackson's military advocacy, the foreign policy worldview of both are different as their grand strategies. Trump is often moved by a unilateral desire to visit '*enemies of the U.S*' with '*fire and fury*' while Jackson was moved by a sense of common commitment to the American people. Trump desires to show his personal power, but Jackson desired to show American power. Woodrow Wilson focused on internationalism and liberal democracy (Paterson 2018). Trump is different as he withdrew the U.S from key international accords and external nation-building (Trump Campaign Speech, April 2016; Posen, 2018).

The U.S foreign policy within the four key themes has always been reformed by different U.S Presidents to address different issues at different times (Fazly, 2020:81). However, U.S core foreign policy interests as defined by every U.S President since WWII are unchanged: to guarantee U.S national security, economic prosperity, and American way of life (Dimitrova, 2017). The objectives are the protection of U.S and its citizens and allies, the preservation of balance of power, the expansion of capital mobility and external democracy

promotion. Trump did not consider the protection of U.S allies and democracy, and so he differs significantly. U.S foreign policy principles for a long period were constructed on neutrality and isolationism, no doubt. However, it is important to mention that U.S foreign policy shifted sharply from the principles of neutrality and isolationism to a rather multilateral and internationalist at the course of the European war and US involvement (Walt, 1998) – a historical event in the reformulation of modern U.S foreign policy (Fazly, 2021).

During WWII (1939-1945) and throughout the Cold War era, U.S foreign policy strategy fully shifted towards internationalism with the Marshal Plan (Paterson 2018). After WW II in 1945, successive U.S leaderships increased emphasis on foreign policy based on external nation-building and democracy promotion. Part of the aims was to globalize U.S ideology of democracy. The Marshal Plan was introduced on December 19, 1947 as an instrument. The General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) which later became the WTO (Altay, 2017) followed. Building on the success of the Marshall Plan, Truman proposed the 1949 Point Four Program that helped to diminish communism with capitalism. Kennedy in turn signed the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 into law and created the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) to further strengthen U.S political obligations to the world.

With Trump shifting dramatically from this trend, his foreign policy contrasts with the four thematic domains of the U.S foreign policy.

Democracy and the Trump Foreign Policy Impact: Engaging International Relations Theories

Two decades ago, Smith argued; '*there is no such thing as international democratic theory which explains the interrelationship of democracy, democratization and the international system*' (2000:1). During that period, scholars of comparative politics and international relations were accused of largely neglecting theoretical research into democratization as foreign policy continued to dominate their interest (Carothers, 2004:2; Schraeder, 2003:21). According to Burnell & Calvert (2005: 436), '*closely informed analysis of what might be called the high politics of international democracy promotion have lagged behind*'.

(Youngs, 2006: 8–9). However, academic research has begun to catch up with the growth of foreign policies, and democratization is now increasingly considered. Yet, what is still largely unexplored is the challenge to theoretically grasp democracy promotion as a foreign policy aim and strategy – that is, to embed empirical research on democracy promotion in foreign policy theoretical perspectives within comparative politics and international relations. The increasing efforts to theorize democracy promotion have largely focused on either democracy promotion as one among other international dimensions of democratization (Erdmann & Kneuer, 2009; Pridham, 1991; Whitehead, 1996), or on the impact of democracy promotion policies of western states on ‘recipient’ countries. Thus, within IR, democracy promotion is mostly analyzed within the paradigms of ‘international socialization’ and ‘compliance’ (Cowles et al., 2001; Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005) and not foreign policy. This is partly why academics struggle to embed empirical research on the Trump foreign policy impact on democracy promotion on theoretical perspectives.

To address this theoretical issue, this study begins by establishing the interrelation between foreign policy, international system/institution, and democracy promotion using the rationalist and constructivist arguments. What is the interrelationship between foreign policy, democratization, and the international system? How do rationalism and constructivism interpret this interrelationship? How do these theories grasp the Trump ‘America First’ foreign policy and its impact on democracy and democratization?

Wendt (1992) and Adler (1997) introduced constructivism in IR to construct a middle ground in the debate between reflectivists and rationalists. Wendt and Adler’s constructivist argument develops from structuralist and symbolic interactions. Structuralist and symbolic interactions hold that international institutions can impact the interests and identities of states (Hopf, 1997; Risse, 2000). The overall views of constructivists and rationalists are conflicting. For constructivists, the structure of the international system is the distribution of ideas. Constructivists thus have idealist ontology (Wendt, 1999). For rationalists on the other hand, the structure of the international system is the distribution of material benefits (Ward, 1995). Rationalism and constructivism do not only disagree on the structure of international system, but also challenge each other in their perception of interests and identities within the international system. Constructivists perceive identities and interests as endogenous – socially constructed as a result of collective meanings. Constructivists conceive actors as reflective agents and not rational maximizers (Ruggie, 1998 & Wendt,

1994). Rationalism on the other hand assumes that actors are rational and make cost-benefit-analysis of their choices (Olson, 1965:78; Elster, 1989, et al; Little, 1991:39-66; Ward, 1995:76-93,). Their arguments about the actorness of states are based material gains (Checkel, 1998:324-348), and they conceive identities and interests as exogenous (Wendt, 1999). Constructivists and rationalists also disagree in their views on international institutions, their capacity and importance (Checkel, 1998:324-348). Constructivists argue that institutions are 'thick' and have direct impact on the interests of actors through normative interaction (Hall & Taylor, 1996:946). Rationalists on the other hand think that institutions are 'thin' and constrain the interests of countries (Pollack, 2001:222-31).

From the foregoing, IR theories are contested on the basis on epistemology and ontology. The challenge that constructivism poses to rationalism is more ontological than epistemological (Ruggie, 1998 & Christiansen, et al, 1999). For instance, constructivists argue that anarchy does not dictate the principles of international structures (Waltz, 1979) which results from the interaction of states (Wendt, 1992, 1994, 1999). Wendt claimed that anarchy is what states make of it (1992). He outlined two basic tenets of constructivism: 1) the structures of human association are determined by shared ideas rather than material forces, 2) the identities and interests of actors are constructed by these shared ideas and not naturally given.

Hopf (1998:171-200) and Wendt (1999) shared same view in their belief that states are social structures and therefore have identities and interests. The identities and interest of state actors that we hold are inter-subjective (Kratochwil & Ruggie, 1986) because they are socially created knowledge (Wendt, 1999). The sharing of this socially created knowledge – what Wendt called 'distribution' results in the construction of 'collective identity' as its primary effects (Sedelmeir, 2004). Other constructivists including Checkel (1999:545-560) and Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeir (2004:661-679) also believe in this concept of knowledge distribution' as 'social learning process'. The academics explained social learning as a process where state actors through interaction with broader institutional contexts such as discursive structures, norms and values, acquire new identities and interests. This 'social learning process' assumes the 'logic of appropriateness' (March & Olsen, 1989). The 'logic of appropriateness' entails a situation in which state actors are motivated by identities, norms, interests; and by 'rhetorical action' which they go on to internalize in the process of social interaction with outside actors. The process of social interaction assumes

strategic use of norm-based arguments when relating with countries to have them liberalized. However, whether or not outside actors internalize liberal norms depend on the logic of appropriateness to their domestic context.

It is now important to outline some of Trump's key executive orders and presidential actions to demonstrate how the rationalist and constructivist arguments grasp his foreign policy worldview – the cost-benefit-analysis of the stewardship of the international system, of external nation-building, and of democracy promotion: Trump signed an executive order banning Muslim dominated countries from the U.S. He signed an executive order on restructuring the U.S military. He withdrew the U.S from the 2016 Paris Agreement. He withdrew the U.S from the 2015 Iran Nuclear Deal. He attempted to withdraw the U.S from NATO through his '*burden sharing*' policy. He announced plans to withdraw the U.S from WTO. Trump declined from endorsing the joint statement issued at the end of the 2018 G7 summit in Canada. At the 2018 United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), Trump's speech signaled the end of U.S leadership of the international system/institutions.

Trump's actions mentioned above are characterized by; 1) U.S interests; 2) threats on U.S interests; 3) strategic responses; and 4) the guideline for U.S foreign policy development. There are five identified patterns which are at the coherent grasp of the rationalist and constructivist arguments:

- 1) Pattern against multilateral institutions
- 2) Unilateral pattern
- 3) Pro-Putin pattern
- 4) Pattern against pro-democracy leaders
- 5) Political nick-naming pattern

The Trump America First Foreign Policy: Impact on Democracy and Democratization

U.S external democracy promotion is impacted through normative interaction, aids, and sanctions (Ikenberry, 2011). The U.S as the hegemonic power of our world-system (Wallerstein, 1995:176 & Patrick, 2010) often feature democracy promotion in its foreign policy. According to the internationalist consensus, the U.S has been playing this role

described by Ikenberry as '*liberal Leviathan*' (2011). However, Trump gave no democracy aids. Even where there were sanctions on authoritarian states and individuals such as Putin, he pressured Congress to lift them. He called Putin's invasion of Ukraine 'savvy' and 'genius'. Majority of his policies restricted U.S commitment to, and participation in international institutions that serve the need of democracy. Suri (2017) argued that Trump took the U.S foreign policy to the democratic bottom as he attempted to '*save*' the U.S from liberal allies committed to democracy promotion. He sued the *Times*, the *Washington Post*, and CNN –nicking the press 'fake news'. The January 6 Capitol Hill invasion stands out as the biggest assault on the legislative arena of democracy. His ally – Jair Bolsonaro replicated that in Brazil, while Jinping and Putin removed presidential term limit from their respective constitutions.

In its democracy report of 2020; '*A Leaderless Struggle for Democracy*', the Freedom House touched upon the Trump impact, identifying the trends that applied only to democratically fragile countries: '*pressure on electoral institution to upturn election outcome and fierce media and judiciary attacks*' (Abramowitz & Repucci, Freedom House, 2018).

Conclusion

From the issues raised and answers supplied from different approach – conceptual, theoretical, epistemological, and ontological, the Trump America First foreign policy is worthy of recognition in IR as Trump doctrine much like the Truman doctrine, the Monroe doctrine, etc. This doctrine is about putting America's interest first, withdrawing America from global accords and the stewardship of the international system. The objective is to make U.S allies and partners share more of the burden of international safety, in order to give the U.S more resources to guarantee its national security and economy – Make America Great Again. The approach involves a pattern against multilateral institutions to cut down the cost of the stewardship of the international system, lessen U.S- Russia tension which costs the U.S in defense blocks, minimize relations with pro-democracy leaders, being unilateral to be able to achieve that, and nick-naming adversaries for populist gains.

Trump's worldview and approach are not only in contrast with the four thematic domains of U.S foreign policy schools of thought; they are a huge challenge to democracy and democratization. While he is not the originator, he is recruiting into his growing base that is acting his anti-democracy scripts across the world.

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