



EUC Paper Series

Policy Insights - Governing Globalization

Building Walls and Retreating into Fortress America: Isolation, Protectionism, and Populism—Is Making America Great Again Working?

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America First and Fortress America

Donald J. Trump's election campaign centered on the theme of "America First" and making "America Great Again." In his inaugural address Mr. Trump unequivocally said that his administration "will follow two simple rules; buy American and hire American" (Trump 2017). Mr. Trump accused the previous administration of squandering American preeminence and blamed the world of taking advantage of American munificence. In the Trump rhetoric, America was *great*; it had *great* jobs, *great* companies, and it was the beacon that shined the light on the world, but it has been reduced to second-class status. Clearly, globalization and open-borders are the cause of this *malaise*. Mr. Trump's promise is to make America great again, take it back to that imagined pinnacle with this populist and anti-globalization rhetoric. In his inaugural address Donald Trump asserted that the United States "does not seek to impose our way of life on anyone...but rather to let it shine as an example" (Trump 2017). Not only did Mr. Trump's campaign attack the previous administration for its liberal policies, but introduced racial overtones into his election campaign and speeches. The far-right groups—including the Ku Klux Klan (KKK)—and the extreme wing of the Republican Party undoubtedly benefitted from the populist and anti-foreigner electoral campaign and they came out in numbers during his large rallies to propel Trump into power (Holley 2016).

In this inaugural address, Mr. Trump argued that foreign countries have enriched themselves at the expense of American industry and people. He added that the United States has "spent trillions and trillions of dollars overseas while America's infrastructure has fallen into disrepair and decay" (Trump 2017). Mr. Trump argued that rest of the world became "rich, while the wealth, strength and confidence" of the United States "dissipated over the horizon." He pointed to how "factories shuttered" and departed American shores one by one without even a "thought about the millions and millions of American workers" who were left behind. His central argument was that the American middle class wealth "has been ripped from their homes and then redistributed all across the world." "Protection will lead to great prosperity and strength," Mr. Trump said. He added that the United States "must protect our borders from the ravages of other countries making our products, stealing our companies and destroying our jobs" (Trump 2017).

“America First” includes a policy of fortress America that involves the construction of a wall on the southern border to prevent Mexican and Central American immigrants from entering the United States. Within days of assuming office, Mr. Trump empowered the Immigration and Custom Enforcement (ICE) to start aggressively rounding up and deporting immigrants who are illegally present in the United States. According to Sean Spicer, the White House spokesperson, the president “wanted to take the shackles off” the CBP and the Border Patrol, and officers of these agencies felt empowered and their jobs were suddenly “becoming fun” (Tracy 2017). More aggressive questioning and detainment at the border control by immigration officers and a selective ban against immigrants and visitors from select Muslim countries was followed by a ban on laptops and other mobile devices on planes entering the United States operated by specific air carriers from Muslim countries.¹ By issuing these Presidential Orders within days of assuming office, Mr. Trump was telegraphing to his supporters that he was protecting the United States from terrorists, gangs, criminals, and illegal immigrants.

Return of Protectionism, or Economic Nationalism?

Mr. Trump carried the “America First” policy on the campaign trail into the realm of the trade policy by calling out China as a currency manipulator and a trade cheat that is flooding the United States with cheap goods heavily subsidized by the Chinese government. He has threatened to withdraw from the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), demanded that Mexico pay for the expensive border wall, and engaged in a war of words with the Mexican government (Ahmed 2017). The much-maligned Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), which was attacked by both presidential candidates—Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton—during the election campaign, suffered a quick death when Mr. Trump rescinded America’s participation in the TPP effectively killing the agreement that took over six years to negotiate with its trading partners. The sudden American withdrawal from the TPP has left the other negotiating partners—Australia, Brunei, Canada, Chile, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore, and Vietnam—of the TPP in a lurch and inadvertently elevated China to a pre-eminent status in the Asian economic sphere.

At the domestic level, Mr. Trump lamented the decline of the coal industry in the United States and the loss of “good jobs” and promised to bring them back. During a campaign rally in the rust belt town of Erie, Pennsylvania, Mr. Trump promised that he “will stop these countries from taking our jobs” and “taking our companies” (Hoover, Mucciolo, and Tsui 2017). However, Trump’s approach to bringing back coal mining jobs consists of deregulating the environmental rules put in place by previous administrations to protect waterways from coal pollution (Iaconangelo 2017). This rapid environmental deregulation is unlikely to save the declining share of coal in energy production and, moreover, the coal industry is shedding jobs because of automation and technological advances (Tabuchi 2017). Similarly, as one of his first moves in office, Mr. Trump forcefully intervened in an attempt to save 1,100 Carrier Plant jobs from being

¹ Nine airlines banned by the Trump administration order are: Royal Jordanian, Egypt Air, Turkish Airlines, Saudi Arabian Airlines, Kuwait Airways, Royal Air Maroc, Qatar Airways, Emirates, and Etihad Airways.

moved from Indiana to Mexico, but in the end it is estimated that maybe only 300 jobs would be saved and those were jobs that were already earmarked for staying in the United States (Gruley and Clough 2017).

Trump's objective to reverse the impact of ever expanding influence of globalization by forcing cost-cutting firms to shift jobs back to the United States from low-wage countries such as Mexico and India. He also wants to prevent immigrants from traveling to high-wage economy to find better jobs and expel those without proper paperwork because they are taking away American jobs. The new administration intends to slam the brakes on globalization and undo its effects. Anti-globalization fervor is not new. Protectionists have always deemed globalization as a threat because it is upending established economic patterns and creating new forms of global inequalities. But in the case of the Trump policies, the debate is between 'traditional' protectionist policies, or simply economic nationalism incorporating protectionist aspects. Environmentalists have railed against globalization because it prompts race-to-bottom policies amongst states and it is exploitative of the natural environment.

Mr. Trump is not content with just reversing Mr. Obama's anti-coal pollution policies. His intent is to tear apart all policies made by the previous administration to address global climate change. His administration seeks to curb climate change research and slash the budget of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). In addition, he has publicly discussed the prospect of the United States exiting the Paris Climate Change Agreement signed in 2015 (Davenport 2017). The Trump administration has vowed to roll back policies aimed at creating an even more open world such as the TPP and sided with Britain's Prime Minister Theresa May who is negotiating Britain's hasty exit from the European Union. The Anglo-American partners, former colonists, protectors of the post-war global liberal order, and promoters of democracy are now seeking to retreat into their native fortress and turn their backs against the trespassing march of globalization.

The Rise of National Populism in Western Europe

Britain's May and America's Trump have taken to sealing borders, building walls, expelling foreigners, selectively banning visitors from certain countries, restricting and scrutinizing students studying in their countries, and revoking visas for highly qualified scientists. Anti-globalization and anti-immigrant sentiments are spreading like wildfire across Europe.

Alternatively, the German extreme-right party, Alternative for Germany (AfD), created a few years ago, took 24 percent of the vote just in one state during the German state elections back in March 2016. AfD is an anti-establishment and anti-liberalization party. The National Front, led by Marine Le Pen is a French nationalist party that supports protectionist policies, reduction of social welfare schemes, principally for immigrants, and seeks to reduce the flow of immigrants into France (Cohen 2017). Nearly three-quarters of the French voters see globalization, immigration, and multiculturalism as a threat (Cohen 2017). The central theme of the Marine Le Pen's campaign is recovering French values at home.

North of France, Greet Wilders and the Party for Freedom did not win the recent Dutch elections, but the movement that emphasized nativism and populism is flourishing in Netherlands. The Party of Freedom increased the number of seats in the Parliament to

20 and their message was co-opted by the center-right parties (Rubin 2017). Golden Dawn is a fascist party with neo-Nazi roots that is thriving in Greece and holds strong xenophobic views. The anti-immigration populist party in Hungary—Jobbik—is also experiencing widespread popularity. The Sweden Democrats Party platform is based on controlling immigration, opposing Turkey’s entry into the European Union, and more recently has called for a Swedish referendum on leaving the EU (The New York Times 2016). The Freedom Party in Austria and the People’s Party in Slovakia have similarly sought to restrict immigration and assert national identity.

The rise of the extremes and their influential voice in the shaping of policies, like in France and the Netherlands, and affecting the political discourse demonstrate their impact. Emergence of these parties highlights political disaffection and economic malaise within EU member states.

Trump’s Jekyll and Hyde Foreign Policy

Trump has held sympathetic views of Russia since his visit to that country in the mid-1980s. His clumsy fascination with the Russian President Vladimir Putin is consistent with the positive conservative commentariat that views Putin as a strong and assertive leader (LaFranchi 2016). Trump’s “America First” policy, the dalliance with Vladimir Putin and Russia, and the variety of intelligence leaks and claims of hacking have sown the seeds of confusion in the U.S.-Russia relationship.

In an interview with Fox News, Mr. Trump said that it is “better to get along with Russia than not.” Mr. Trump went on to add that if “Russia helps us in the fight against ISIS, which is a major fight, and Islamic terrorism all over the world, major fight, that’s a good thing” (Stefansky 2017). In the same interview, Mr. Trump said that he “respects Putin.” While Mr. Trump was touting his respect for the Russian president, his inexperienced and newly appointed U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, Ms. Nikki Haley, was blasting Russia on the floor of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). Ms. Haley said that the “United States continues to condemn and call for an immediate end to the Russian occupation of Crimea” and she asserted that “Crimea is a part of Ukraine” and that that the “Crimea-related sanctions will remain in place until Russia returns control over the peninsula to Ukraine” (Gaouette and Roth 2017). In return, Russia vetoed an American-sponsored UNSC resolution that condemned the Assad regime for using chemical weapons against civilians. Russia has vetoed eight times in favor of Syria to protect the Assad regime from international condemnation (Sengupta 2017).

In his first visit to a NATO ministerial meeting in Brussels, Rex Tillerson, the newly appointed Secretary of State, accused Russia of “aggression” in Ukraine and told his counterparts that their alliance is “fundamental to countering both nonviolent, but at times violent, Russian agitation” (U.S. State Department 2017). He also said U.S. sanctions against Moscow will remain in effect until it “reverses the actions” that triggered them. The Obama administration imposed the stringent sanctions in response to Russia’s annexation of Ukraine’s Crimean peninsula in 2014 and expanded the sanctions after Moscow started backing pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine. The Russian president awarded Rex Tillerson, the former chief of the energy giant Exxon-Mobil, the Friendship Medal at a ceremony in Moscow in 2013 (Filipov 2016). Tillerson’s

appointment to head the State Department pointed to a rapprochement between the United States and Russia. However, Assad's use of chemical weapons and U.S. missile strikes against Syria on April 6th, 2017 has taken U.S.-Russia ties to exactly where it was before—mutual recrimination and deep mistrust. Mr. Trump himself described the U.S.-Russia relationship as being “at an all-time low.”

Syria-Sarin Gas Attacks and U.S Policy Towards Syria and Russia

The Syrian war involving neighboring states, major outside powers, and several non-state actors and their proxies has turned into a destructive and complex conflict. Mr. Trump has rightfully expressed his remorse after seeing the raw images of people, including many children, suffering from terrible after-effects of Sarin nerve gas. The Assad regime conducted chemical warfare in 2013 when Mr. Obama drew his famous redline, but relented when it came to attacking the Syrian regime when it crossed the imaginary redline. Mr. Trump severely criticized Mr. Obama during the campaign trail and after assuming office for his weak Syria policy. But his administration declared that it would be “silly” to insist on the ouster of Bashar al-Assad of Syria; in fact, this has been Mr. Trump's view during the campaign. His tweets and statements indicated that the Trump administration was going to work with the Russians and the Syrian government to end the war in Syria. However, after viewing the horrific attacks Mr. Trump said that his attitude towards “Syria and Assad has changed very much.” He said that the chemical attacks that killed innocent children and women “crossed a lot of lines” (Landler, Sanger, and Shear 2017).

It is clear that the Assad regime does not have an ounce of morality left and they have dropped all pretenses of even attempting to play by the rules of war (*jus in bello*). The United States cannot commit, and probably will not commit, ground troops; Mr. Obama did not do so and Mr. Trump appears to share a similar view. We know now that the air war is costly because it always ends up destroying the wrong target and killing innocents. Thus, pursuing an intense air campaign is not going to necessarily alleviate the situation on ground in Syria. Meanwhile, Mr. Assad continues his leadership in his secure location in Damascus with Russian and Iranian protection.

Although Russia helped to broker the deal that would have removed the ability of the Syrian regime to use chemical weapons, it is now evident that they did not follow through on the agreement and did not do their due diligence. Responsibility for managing the actual process of shipping out the chemicals was entrusted to the Organization for Prevention of Chemical Weapons (OPCW). However, chemical weapons are easy to hide. They do not always leave footprints and radiation signatures as nuclear weapons do. Hence, it is easier to evade detection. It is the general assessment of the United States government that the Assad regime was not fully compliant with the OPCW and the Russians were not particularly eager to implement the agreement anyway (Trump 2017). Initially, the agreement was to ship the chemicals to Russian territory and destroy them, but subsequently that was modified to enable destruction of some of the chemicals in Syria itself (Tabor 2017). It is now clear that the agreement was not fully carried out and the OPCW was not able to verify and certify that the chemical weapons were all accounted for. Clearly the Russians are protecting Assad and defending the war crimes of a desperate regime (Trump 2017). However, it is not clear how the recent attacks on the

empty airfield would translate into long-term U.S. foreign policy towards Syria beyond symbolic impact.

Transactional Approach to Foreign Policy: The Curious Case of NATO

Trump views national security primarily through an economic lens and in a transactional manner; he sees NATO as a “protection racket” and wants to know how the United States benefits from each transaction. He largely sees the United States as being somehow cheated (economically) and wants to rectify that balance by demanding payments from allies and enemies. Hence, his decision to stick a bill in the hands of the German Chancellor for U.S.-led NATO expenses in providing security to Europe. He has adopted a similar message towards Asian security. Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton argued that Trump was attempting to turn alliances into a protection racket (and it is not far from the truth). However, in a joint press conference with NATO Secretary General, Jens Stoltenberg, Mr. Trump reversed himself and has described that NATO is “no longer obsolete” (Hagen 2017). However, Mr. Trump insisted that NATO members must “pay their fair share instead of relying on the United States to make up the difference” (Hagen 2017).

The chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Bob Corker, believes that Trump thinks of himself as a “wrecking ball” against traditional American foreign policy and he remains determined to “just destroy everything about” the U.S. establishment’s view of the world, even as he compromises on NATO, China, and a handful of other issues (Glasser 2017). So Mr. Trump’s objective is to engage in actions that would pull out the comfort rug of U.S.-supported global order abruptly and leave the world dangling, potentially allow warring states to act against and settle amongst themselves, while the U.S. retreats into fortress America.

Lurching Approach or Evolving Trump Doctrine: Say one thing and then back away two steps

Immediately after his election victory, Mr. Trump took a congratulatory call from the Taiwanese President Tsai-ing-Wen and the Chinese reacted with horror and hostility. The Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi called this “a petty trick” by Taipei, and it would not “change international recognition of the one-China policy” (Ng and Chung 2016). Subsequently Mr. Trump inverted his position said he would honor the United States’ longstanding “one China” policy in a phone call with Chinese President Xi Jinping, an effort to smooth the tensions between the two powers (Lander and Forsythe 2017). After his tough talk about North Korea and “all options on table,” and the rising the specter of military confrontation during his visit to South Korea, Tillerson changed his tune and agreed that “the U.S. side is ready to develop relations with China based on the principle of no conflict, no confrontation, mutual respect, and win-win cooperation” in his visit to Beijing (Baijie and Yunbi 2017). After a face-to-face meeting with the Chinese President, Mr. Trump once again reversed his position and decided not label China as a “currency manipulator” and described Mr. Xi as a “terrific person” and a “very special man” (Lederman 2017). While simultaneously threatening military action against North Korea, Mr. Trump has sought Chinese assistance to prevent further escalation. The new

American foreign policy has surely switched from pro-Russia and anti-China to anti-Russia to pro-China within the first 100 days of Mr. Trump assuming office. It remains to be seen whether this is a deliberate tactic of confusing the enemy to prevent them from discovering the real intent was borrowed from the ancient Chinese strategist Sun Tzu's "Art of War" or if it is derived from Trump's own "The Art of the Deal."

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