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## The Tenets of Trumpism – from Political Realism to Populism

**Abstract:** The purpose of this article is to analyze US foreign policy under the new White House administration and to present the most important aspects of Trump's emerging doctrine, with the aim of answering the following questions: what are the goals and tenets of, and the measures to implement, the foreign policy outlined in the new US National Security Strategy? Which trends can be considered dominant in Trump's emerging doctrine? What challenges and threats to international security were mentioned in the document? Do traditional US allies still play an important role in the superpower's security strategy? The thesis of this paper is that political realism is the main trend in Trump's emerging doctrine and that US foreign policy has taken a unilateral course, with a large dose of populism.

**Key words:** doctrine, Donald Trump, United States of America, national security strategy, US foreign and security policy

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### Introduction

Within a year of entering the White House, Donald Trump has made several important decisions in the field of US foreign and security policy (Waśko-Owsiejczuk, 2017a, pp. 161–178), often giving contradictory signals to other participants in international relations, and introducing uncertainty and tension into relations with other countries and organizations. More than a year after the change of administration in the White House, can we determine which trend will dominate the emerging US foreign policy? Will it be analogous to other Republican presidents – political realism? Idealism? Unilateralism? Multilateralism? Or maybe populism? The answer to this question is not easy to formulate, mainly due to the differences in position between the President and his closest advisors, and his seemingly frequently changing opinion on important international issues. Considering that our understanding of the Obama and Bush doctrines were formulated based on strategic documents issued during their term of office, the answer to the question of what the key tenets of Trump's doctrine will be may be found by analyzing *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, published in December 2017.

The purpose of this article is to analyze US foreign policy under the new White House administration and to present the most important aspects of 'Trumpism,' with the aim of answering the following questions: what are the goals and tenets of, and measures to implement, the foreign policy stated in the new US National Security Strategy? Which trends can be considered dominant in Trump's emerging doctrine? What challenges and threats to international security were mentioned in the document? Do traditional US allies still play an important role in the superpower's security strategy?

The thesis of this paper is that political realism is the main trend in Trump's emerging doctrine and that US foreign policy has taken a unilateral course, with a large dose of

populism. The author understands doctrine as a conceptualization of foreign policy by the state, which is expressed in strategic documents and the President's statements, both of which will be analyzed in this article.

### **The Main Trends in International Relations Theory in US Foreign Policy in the Twenty-First Century**

Since the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States of America has acted as the only superpower. This term refers to the military, economic and political power of the country, and these factors place the US at the top of the world's hierarchy. In the US, a militarized approach to security prevails, thus the main trend in international relations at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century remains political realism. Supporters of political realism, such as Hans Morgenthau, Kenneth Waltz and John Mearsheimer, understand security in terms of military strength. The world is perceived as a dangerous place where violence is an unavoidable element of the system. According to this theory, countries are in constant competition with one another. As Justyna Zajac points out: "American realists doubt the effectiveness of the international law system and believe that only the US can effectively guard its own interests, without cooperation with any other country" (Zajac, 2006, p. 16). Realism does not exclude "divine intervention" in politics. Realists often refer to "the will of God" to justify actions involving the use of force or going beyond the boundaries of international law (Szymborski, 2004, p. 43). The most important players in international relations – according to realists – are countries that shape international security. Each country should be self-sufficient and must be guided by its own national interests in relations with other countries (Morgenthau, 1967). One can never be sure of the intentions of other countries, and therefore it is important to constantly invest in the expansion of the country's military might (Burchill, 2006, p. 97). Improvements in security in one country simultaneously weaken the security of its opponent, and this generates a sense of danger. In fear of attack from a stronger player in international relations, other countries strive to increase their own strength (Herz, 1950, pp. 157–180). Security can be seen not as a goal, but as a consequence of proper preparation, which can easily be lost when one lacks understanding of what it is and how important it is. For this reason, security is defined and perceived through a prism of threats which a country should be prepared to face (Ullman, 1983, pp. 129–153).

The tendency to define security through military strength results not only from the fact that the United States is an unrivaled military power in the world, but also because of "American Exceptionalism,"<sup>1</sup> in which the USA plays the role of world leader. The American system of values – deeply rooted democracy and respect for the rule of law – in the eyes of neoconservatives,<sup>2</sup> predestines the US to lead the historic mission of

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<sup>1</sup> On the topic of American Exceptionalism see: Lipset, 2008; Bacevich, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> The neoconservative school of thought began to form in the United States in the 1970s–80s. The founders of neoconservatism were Irving Kristol, Norman Podhoretz, Daniel Bell, Seymour M. Lipset, Daniel Moynihan, Sidney Hook, Walter Laqueur, and Richard Hofstadter, who stressed the importance of tradition, patriotism, and moral and religious values in the functioning of society. See: Stelzer, 2007; Zajac, 2008, p. 49.

spreading peace, justice and democracy in the world. As stated by William Kristol and Lawrence Kaplan: “What is wrong with US dominance, if it serves our principles and exalted ideals?” (Kaplan, Kristol, 2003, p. 112). In their opinion, Americans use military force in a way that other countries are not capable of – justly and wisely.

The opposite of political realism is idealism, which has long been present in American politics. Idealists perceive international relations as a domain of possibilities where progress is achieved through multilateral cooperation, harmony of interests and altruistic attitudes (Czaputowicz, 2008, p. 81). The goal is to strive for noble ideals, not material possessions. Idealists not only moralize, but also often refer to God and God’s influence on politics. There is no doubt that Americans are a religious nation that believes in the moral power of God, which is most often interpreted as the fight between good and evil. Seymour Lipset noted: “Americans are utopian moralists who support institutional virtue and the condemnation of bad people” (Lipset, 2008, p. 92).

Unilateralism, which has had a significant influence on US foreign policy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, is defined as “American engagement in the world that minimizes and excludes, where possible, the participation of other governments and organizations. Unilateralists do not accept the compromises necessary for the smooth functioning of alliances and oppose the transfer of serious power to international organizations” (Haass, 2004, pp. 116–117). According to this worldview, the US, as the only superpower in the world, can make independent decisions in solving global and regional problems. It is worth emphasizing that the unilateralist approach to foreign policy is extremely useful for decision-makers, because it enables quick and independent decision making, without the need to compromise or obtain consent from other players in international relations (which is particularly useful in military operations). The United States, referred to as “the most powerful country in the world” (Kissinger, 2009, p. 890), has considerable influence in shaping the international order. Condoleezza Rice, the former Secretary of State in the administration of George W. Bush, stressed that the US, as a “pillar upholding the world order, can be the only guarantor of peace and international security” (Rice, 2000, p. 50). Thus, in terms of foreign policy and security, the main emphasis should be placed on strengthening US military power. Investment in new military technology should ensure a quick reaction by American troops to unexpected threats, as well as to enable effective operation in armed conflicts. In contrast to multilateralism, which stresses international cooperation with various stakeholders, unilateralists, while open to support from allies during military operations, are skeptical about cooperating with other stakeholders in international relations, preferring independent decision-making. US involvement in international affairs “should take place on their own terms and in accordance with their own interests” (Zajac, 2006, p. 17). Unilateralists justify their assertive approach to foreign and security policy with pragmatic and ideological reasoning. Charles Krauthammer states that “the essence of unilateralism is that we do not allow others, no matter how good their intentions, to stop us from realizing the essential interests of ensuring the security of the US and the free world” (Krauthammer, 2002, p. 45).

On occasion, isolationist catchphrases have been voiced by American politicians, who envision less American involvement in international affairs and the interests of other countries (Braumoeller, 2010). There have been many reasons given, such as a lack

of vital interests for the superpower to defend,<sup>3</sup> a lack of direct threats to US security, or the creation of unnecessary financial burdens. Isolationists claim that “the US cannot afford to be active on the international arena due to urgent domestic issues and limited resources” (Haass, 2004, p. 79). Proponents of a return to a policy based on isolation can be heard in every Congressional session, however, neither Congress nor public opinion have given their support for conservative slogans promoting isolationism. The total withdrawal of the US from world affairs has always been considered impossible and potentially risky for American interests. Internationalism, which assumes cooperation between nations, has had much more support. Ongoing globalization has increased interdependence between countries and cooperation has proved to be more profitable than isolation in foreign and security policy (Kuehl, Ostrower, 2002, pp. 241–257).

The recent changes in the White House have significantly modified US foreign policy. Alongside political realism and unilateralism, populism has now gained a prominent place. Populists use simple and catchy slogans, often referring to justice or a sense of morality, to criticize the so-called ‘elites’ and their values in order to gain public support, thus strengthening their own influence and power. They do not want to overthrow the democratic system; on the contrary, they want to restore it and reform it in their image. The following factors are important: dissatisfaction among members of society; a charismatic leader; catchy slogans; and an effective method (e.g. demagoguery). Populist methods have been visible for several years now among European politicians, and they have also recently been adopted by Americans. The use of populist slogans has deep roots in American politics, dating back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and they continue to be influential to this day (see: Tokarczyk, 2006, pp. 19–32).

### The “America First” Doctrine

Donald Trump entered the White House on January 20, 2017. During his election campaign, he promised far-reaching changes in US foreign policy. According to his “America First” doctrine, the US was to focus on internal/domestic problems and withdraw from international agreements that were incompatible with national interests (e.g. NAFTA). The superpower’s approach to the collective security system was also to be altered, with the introduction of the principle of conditional support in NATO (based upon fulfillment of the obligation to pay membership fees). Trump also announced that he would reduce expenditure on NATO and the UN; introduce strict regulations in immigration law; immediately deport illegal immigrants from the USA; re-instate the use of torture for terror suspects; and reset the relationship with Russia and establish closer cooperation in the fight against terrorism in the Middle East (Waśko-Owsiejczuk, 2017a, pp. 161–178). Trump’s statements greatly concerned not only members of NATO, but also members of the European Union, a union he claimed he would like to see dissolved.

After taking office, Donald Trump first outlined his thoughts and plans regarding US foreign policy in his speech at the joint session of both chambers of Congress on February

<sup>3</sup> According to some researchers, US dominance is accompanied by profound isolationism. See: Moon, 2006, pp. 431–442.

28, 2017. He spoke of ensuring peace, harmony and stability in international relations; of rebuilding the global position of the superpower; of fighting with radical Islamic terrorists; of sealing US borders by building a wall on the border with Mexico; of combating drug trafficking; of reforming the immigration system; and of withdrawal of the US from unfavorable international agreements (e.g. the Trans-Pacific Partnership<sup>4</sup>). Moreover, he declared support for Israel; he stood against the lifting of sanctions for Iran; he underlined the importance of alliances such as NATO; and announced a great reconstruction of the American army. He also made his nationalist perception of the world clear with the words: “My job is not to represent the world. My job is to represent the United States of America” (*Remarks by President Trump in Joint Address to Congress*, 2017).

Criticism of Trump’s speech quickly appeared in the media. Critics claimed that Trump wanted to convince Americans that an open, pluralistic and multicultural society was dangerous. To do this, he appealed to fear, creating the image of the US as a country in danger, with terrorists demanding entry into the country with plans to carry out attacks on US soil (Cassidy, 2017).

The President delivered his second most important speech, from the point of view of US foreign policy, at the UN General Assembly Forum on September 19, 2017. It was then that he emphasized that, as President, he would always prioritize American interests above those of other countries, according to the doctrine of “America First.” He also announced an increase in defense expenditure, to \$700 billion a year. Trump claimed the US would not impose its lifestyle on other nations, but instead wished to be an example of prosperity, freedom and law and order. He also presented a list of countries forming a new “axis of evil,” including Venezuela alongside Iran and North Korea. The new American President threatened the North Korean regime with “total destruction” of their country if they continued to develop their nuclear program. He criticized the agreement with Iran, signed in 2015, as one of the worst and most unilateral transactions that the US had ever taken part in. He accused the Iranian authorities (describing them as a “murderous regime”) of carrying out destabilizing activities, and spreading violence and terrorism in the Middle East. Besides hostile regimes, other threats the President listed included: radical Islamic terrorism; trafficking of drugs, weapons and people; mass migration and cyberterrorism. He called on the UN to carry out reforms, while at the same time threatening to reduce funding for the organization (*Remarks by President Trump to the 72<sup>nd</sup> Session of the United Nations General Assembly*, 2017).

This speech was also met with a wave of criticism. It was compared to a speech given by the former Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi in the same location in 2009, and Trump was accused of breaking diplomatic convention by using hate speech. Critics claimed that the President had made the wrong speech at the wrong time and for the wrong audience. The rhetoric used by the US President was rated as extremely hostile and dangerous, which could lead to an escalation of the conflict with North Korea (Borger, 2017; *Trump’s first UN speech met with criticism from some leaders*; Dubenko, 2017), even though there were clear similarities to the speech made by former US Republican President, George W. Bush (who declared the beginning of the war on terror while speaking

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<sup>4</sup> Assuming that traditional bilateral trade agreements are more favorable to Americans, one of the first decisions of President Trump was to start the process of withdrawing the US from a multilateral trade agreement under the Trans-Pacific Partnership. See Mui, 2017.

in front of Congress in 2002 and announced a list of countries belonging to the “axis of evil”). The main difference was the location chosen for the speech. President Trump threatened to destroy another country during a forum of the UN, an organization that was established to prevent war and attempts to solve international problems through diplomatic rather than military means.

The key tenets of Trump’s doctrine were spelled out in *The National Security Strategy* of December 2017, in which “America First” was the main catchphrase. China and Russia were mentioned in the list of threats to US security. These “rival powers” were increasing their armed forces, seeking to control information and data, expanding their influence and working on advanced weapons that could threaten critical American infrastructure. The growing power of these countries posed a threat to the international position, influence and interests of the United States. It was also emphasized that current US policy towards these countries was not very effective. Moreover, including China and Russia in international institutions and establishing commercial partnerships with them did not seem to have made these countries less threatening or more trustworthy partners. As noted in the document, these rival nations used propaganda to discredit democracy and spread anti-western slogans and false information in order to create divisions between the US and its allies. North Korea and Iran were also seen as threats – these countries wished to destabilize regions, threaten the United States and their allies, develop weapons of mass destruction, support terrorism and use violent repression against civilians. The last threat listed was terrorist organizations and other criminal groups, including drug cartels. In response to such threats, an increase in defense spending was announced, intended to strengthen the position of the United States and improve its position relative to its rivals. The President also announced a strategic (political, economic and military) rivalry between the superpower and other countries. The United States was to continue to play the role of “world leader,” using its powerful position to put pressure on other stakeholders in international relations (*The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, 2017, pp. 1–3).

The new US security strategy was to be based on four pillars. First, protecting the American homeland and society – strengthening border controls; reforming the immigration system (including restrictions on visa programs); increasing protection of critical infrastructure; strengthening the missile defense system; and combating cyber-terrorism and bioterrorism. Second, ensuring economic security – the revival of the American economy; tax reform; fair and mutually beneficial economic relations; maintaining a leading role in research, innovation and technology; ensuring US dominance in its domestic energy market. Third, maintaining peace through strength – modernization of the army; maintaining a military advantage over rivals; strengthening US capabilities in cyberspace and outer space; renewal of intelligence capabilities; practicing diplomacy from a position of strength; fair distribution of responsibility among allies for protection against common threats. Fourth, increasing American influence – maintaining a strong position in multilateral organizations; protection of American values (freedom, democracy, and the rule of law); not imposing the American way of life and values on other nations; promoting economic growth, especially among countries aspiring to be partners with the US in terms of trade and security; strengthening US sovereignty; and always putting the national interest of the United States first. The document stresses



the importance of cooperation with traditional allies such as South Korea, Japan and Australia, especially in the context of China's growing power and strained relations with North Korea. It also mentions establishing closer cooperation with India, New Zealand and the countries of Southeast Asia. As for Europe, continued cooperation within the North Atlantic Alliance (the eastern flank of NATO) was declared, especially in response to the threat in the form of Russia which "reaches for illegal means, aims at weakening American credibility towards its allies, undermines transatlantic unity and weakens European institutions and governments." In the Middle East, the United States was to bring about stability, and continue cooperation with Iraq to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons (*The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, 2017, pp. 3–55).

*The National Security Strategy* of 2017 was criticized by the Russians, who described the document as "confrontational," leading to hostility, and viewing the world from the perspective of strength, striving to maintain US domination of the international system at all costs. China also criticized the new strategy, judging it to be based on the obsolete concepts of Cold War mentality and the zero-sum game. The media stressed that the aims presented in the new US foreign policy carried the risk of causing isolation. The document emphasized the unilateral position of the superpower, steering the approach to international relations away from cooperation and towards strong competition (Kramer, 2017; Chhabra, 2018).

Although it was emphasized in *The National Security Strategy* that this policy was not of an ideological nature and was only focused on achieving results, the concepts outlined in Trump's foreign policy have clear elements of political realism, such as: acting based on the national interests of the United States in international relations; maintaining the dominant position of the US in the international system; increasing military potential; deterring opponents; threatening "rogue states" and terrorists with the use of military force; propagating the idea in the US that the global environment is an area for competition, not cooperation; and indicating that sovereign states are the greatest hope for global peace. Donald Trump himself defined this trend in US foreign policy as "principled realism," which is based on common goals, interests and values (*Remarks by President Trump on the Strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia*, 2017), and is guided by results, not ideology. It is based on the assumption that peace, security and prosperity depend on strong and sovereign nations (*The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, 2017, p. 1).

Slogans used during the election campaign of Donald Trump pointed to far-reaching changes in the concept of US security policy: "America First;" less expenditure on the collective security system; unilateral action on the part of the US; and less involvement in international affairs. These changes would mean steering US security policy in the direction of isolationism. Although of little importance in the era of globalization, in which countries function in the international system as interlinked entities, some isolationist slogans have gained the support of the public, especially those referring to US economic interests and those ensuring security for Americans. One of the most important decisions of the new US President during his first 100 days in office was the introduction of an entry ban to the USA for citizens from seven countries: Iraq, Iran, Syria, Libya, Yemen, Somalia and Sudan. The decision, criticized by the international community and, indeed,

by many Americans, was blocked by the courts when it was found to be in violation of the American Constitution (Waśko-Owsiejczuk, 2017a). Other examples of typically isolationist actions are Trump's decision to withdraw the United States from UNESCO (see: Vabulas, 2017) and the Paris Climate Agreement (see: Shear, 2017).

Although President Trump is considered to be a tough-minded realist, who calculates profits and losses like a businessman, traces of idealism can be found in his statements. He has preached about the need for liberty, equality and justice in reference to the civilian populations oppressed by the regimes of North Korea, Venezuela and Iran. Although Trump, unlike President George W. Bush, is not yet calling for intervention to release these people from dictatorial oppressors, the decision to launch a military response to the use of chemical weapons in Syria was surprising, not only because the US President had just announced that he would focus on domestic affairs, but also because of his earlier, pro-Russian statements. During the election campaign, Trump declared that Ukraine was less important for the USA than other NATO countries, and that neither the solution to the conflict, nor responsibility for it, should be borne by the United States (LoBianco, 2015). In conjunction with declarations of limited (conditional) involvement in the defense of allies within NATO, this declaration could be treated as an announcement of changes in the United States' approach to solving international problems, an approach that would be much more distant.

Populism has gained an important place in US foreign and security policy due to President Trump, who has taken strides to build an image of himself as a strong leader from outside the establishment, the "voice of the people" who understands the needs and problems of the average, "forgotten" American. In the election campaign, he promised honesty and transparency in politics; putting Americans' interests first; giving power to the people; ending the rule of privileged groups; new jobs; support for entrepreneurs; and reduction of taxes. Voters were persuaded by slogans such as "America First" and "Make America Great Again," and by the vision of a safe country with a strong leader who used nationalist slogans and referred to traditional, especially Christian, values. As pointed out by the press, Trump promised voters a new America – a country that was safe and wealthy, where he would revive closed factories, build new roads, end unemployment, deport criminals, end drug addiction, and get corrupt elites out of Washington D.C. (Wolffe, 2017; Thrush, 2017).

## Conclusions

Trump's doctrine is still developing. It appears that the US President tends to make *ad hoc* decisions, and there is a noticeable absence of long-term strategy. Clarifying the basic tenets of US foreign policy is not easy, due to the lack of coherence between official documents and statements made by President Trump, and the divergent positions held by him, the cabinet and Congress on important international issues. This introduces uncertainty and tension in relations with other countries and organizations. Since being sworn in as President, Trump has changed his mind several times on various issues. One such issue is Russia, towards which the President originally took a favorable stance, wanting to encourage cooperation between the two countries, but he has since changed



his position, with Russia being currently listed as a threat to the security and power of the US in *The National Security Strategy*. The President has also changed his mind about the European Union – he initially wished the organization would be dissolved, but, during the second month of his term, he assured the public that he supported its existence and had good relations with European allies, and confirmed continued cooperation between Washington D.C. and Brussels (Waśko-Owsiejczuk, 2017b). He has also strengthened the capabilities of US forces in Europe (the eastern flank of NATO) and announced the possibility of helping European allies diversify their energy supply through exports from the US. The President's position on NATO is still uncertain. On the one hand, Trump has criticized the alliance as “outdated,” and has announced conditional support of other members only after they fulfill their obligations to pay their membership fees. On the other hand, he has praised the organization for being a modern, cost-sharing pillar of American and European security and has confirmed US commitment to the alliance (Waśko-Owsiejczuk, 2017a). However, despite these assurances, while presenting the New National Security Strategy, President Trump again returned to earlier rhetoric, stressing that the United States will demand compensation from allies for their commitment to their defense (*Remarks by President Trump on the Administration's National Security Strategy*, 2017). The involvement of the superpower in solving international problems is also uncertain. Will the United States continue to react to human rights violations, as it did in Syria in April 2017? Or will the US begin to focus only on internal matters?

Despite many contradictions and uncertainties, some premises do allow us to determine the current direction of US foreign policy. The results of an analysis of the US *National Security Strategy* and the President's statements indicate that the dominant trend in Trump's emerging doctrine is political realism, in which US foreign policy has adopted a unilateral course. ‘Trumpism’ is based on the following tenets:

- putting US national interests first;
- resignation from unfavorable international agreements;
- more assertive attitude of the USA towards other countries and organizations;
- elimination of threats to US security at their source;
- increased capability to respond to potential threats;
- US economic strength = US military power;
- combating hostile regimes and terrorism;
- striving to maintain military domination;
- military strength as the most effective tool for implementing foreign policy;
- rivalry with other powers in order to maintain the USA's international position, and to ensure security and prosperity for Americans (Waśko-Owsiejczuk, 2018).

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## Założenia doktryny Trumpa – od realizmu politycznego do populizmu

### Streszczenie

Celem niniejszego artykułu jest analiza polityki zagranicznej USA za rządów nowej administracji Białego Domu; przedstawienie najważniejszych założeń kształtującej się doktryny Trumpa, co ma umożliwić odpowiedź na następujące pytania badawcze: jakie cele, założenia i środki realizacji polityki zagranicznej wyznaczono w nowej Strategii Bezpieczeństwa Narodowego USA? jaki nurt można uznać za dominujący w kształtującej się doktrynie Trumpa? jakie wyzwania i zagrożenia dla bezpieczeństwa międzynarodowego wymieniono w dokumencie? czy tradycyjni sojusznicy USA nadal zajmują ważne miejsce w strategii bezpieczeństwa supermocarstwa? Teza artykułu zawiera się w zdaniu, iż dominującym nurtem w kształtującej się doktrynie Trumpa jest realizm polityczny, polityka zagraniczna USA przy tym obiera kurs unilateralny, z dużą dawką populizmu.

**Słowa kluczowe:** doktryna, Donald Trump, Stany Zjednoczone Ameryki, strategia bezpieczeństwa narodowego, polityka zagraniczna i bezpieczeństwa USA

