

'Enemies of the people': Donald Trump and the security imaginary of America First

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Abstract

The discursive domain of (in)security is integral to nationalist populism, as documented in the political rhetoric of Donald Trump. This article combines insights from political psychology on blame attribution with scholarship in International Relations on security narratives to show how the reframing of national identity through a populist security imaginary elevated internal 'enemies of the people' to an ontological status of equal, or even superior standing to that of external threats to national security. Portraying internal and external Others as equally existential threats endangering the 'real' United States informed both foreign policy choices and mobilised voters through an affective persuasion of audiences, actively dividing society for political gain. Populist appeals to resentment, fear, and anxiety constituted a shared affective space between Trump and his followers that provided a source of mutual ontological reassurance and the legitimisation of America First measures from immigration restrictions to trade protectionism and a Jacksonian foreign policy.

Keywords

America First, critical security studies, Donald Trump, narratives, national security, political rhetoric, populism, US foreign policy

Introduction

This article applies the analytical framework of a populist security imaginary to the political rhetoric of President Donald Trump. It examines how America First actively divided audiences for political gain through a set of interlinking narratives that attributed blame for the existential threats facing the nation with internal and external 'enemies of the people' (Hameleers et al., 2017). Through the antagonistic logic of populism, insecurities perceived by ordinary people are framed as the responsibility of a corrupt establishment (Mudde, 2004) and misguided ideologies and concepts, such as transnational 'globalism' or 'political correctness' that are pursued by a

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cosmopolitan elite in politics, business, media, and academia. In nationalist populist discourses, fears about the existential threats emerging from immigration, violent crime, or terrorism and anxieties surrounding socio-cultural and socio-economic shifts in society are simultaneously linked to affective appeals to collective narcissism (De Zavala et al., 2019; Marchlewska et al., 2018) that urge national belonging through nostalgic sentiments for an idealised past of national greatness (Browning, 2019). In his populist construction of identity, security, and threat, Donald Trump, not only problematised issues of popular sovereignty (Canovan, 2005) and engaged in anti-elite hostility (Mudde, 2017), but he constructed an alternative political reality through existential crisis narratives (Homolar and Scholz, 2019), post-truth rhetoric (D'Ancona, 2017; Kakutani, 2018), humiliation discourse (Homolar and Löfflmann, 2021), and conspiracy theories (Silva et al., 2017). Through these discursive devices, popular anxieties surrounding the socio-cultural and socio-economic effects of globalisation and demographic change and fears of threatening and alien Others (Norris and Inglehart, 2019; Wodak, 2015) were reproduced and reinforced in the everyday, including their promotion and multiplication through various right-wing media channels and social media platforms (Engesser et al., 2017; Gerbaudo, 2018).

A populist security imaginary produces a reframing of national identity through affective appeals and narratives that parochialise the national Self, conflating it with the ontological insecurities of populist voters, while significantly expanding the category of the threatening Other to include political opponents, the press and media, courts and institutions, the national security establishment, and civil rights groups as 'enemies of the people'. This dual reframing of the dominant ideational categories of the Self and Other in populist rhetoric plays an integral part in processes of political communication, the legitimisation of policy, and the mobilisation of voters. Operating from a discursive understanding of populism as antagonistic rhetoric of anti-elitism and people-centrism (Canovan, 1981; Hawkins, 2009; Kazin, 1998; Mudde, 2004), this article advances an analytical framework that goes beyond the people versus elite core dichotomy to capture the particular internal and external identity performing dynamics of populist rhetoric and its security dimension. Conceptually and empirically, this research engages a growing literature in International Relations (IR) and security studies on the interlinkage of ontological security and populism (Steele and Homolar, 2019), while expanding on existing works on the impact of nationalist populism on US foreign and security policy (Löfflmann, 2019), and the securitisation of immigration (Fermor and Holland, 2020).

The article seeks to make two principal contributions to the study of populism and the performance of security narratives in IR. First, it argues that while existing works on identity discourses and security narratives have overwhelmingly focused on the identity-building function of differentiating the threatened national Self from the threatening external Other (Campbell, 1992; Homolar, 2021), populist security narratives elevate the internal Other, the 'enemy of the people' to an ontological status of equal, or even superior standing to that of external threats to national security. This internalisation of enmity in populist rhetoric from undocumented immigrants to Black Lives Matter activists and news reporters results in popular identity displacing national identity as the premier reference point of a security imaginary, a development that so far has not garnered a lot of attention in constructivist IR scholarship. As a result of this dual antagonism and the amalgamation of popular and national identity, the populist security imaginary applies a Schmittian enemy-centric framework both to the legitimisation of external policies, such as trade, immigration, and foreign policy, and the domestic mobilisation of voters. In

populism, the enemy appears both outside and inside the gates. An analytical focus on the dual role of populist security narratives therefore goes beyond existing works that have examined Trump's America First agenda through the lens of ethno-nationalism and its projection onto an external foreign Other, for example, in the form of Trump's obvious Islamophobia (Restad, 2020).

Second, the article identifies affective appeals to ontological security, and in particular, sentiments of anti-elite resentment, fear of alien Others, and socio-economic and socio-cultural anxiety as key narrative elements that establish the ideational and emotive connection between populist speaker and audience beyond simple anti-elitism. While other researchers have explored the interaction between Trump and his followers, for example, through his communication on social media and the populist framing of trade issues (Boucher and Thies, 2019), the analytical framework of a populist security imaginary reveals how the ontological reassurance of voters and their rhetorical validation has elevated the working class and non-college-educated core constituencies of Donald Trump in the American heartland to the status of sole relevant representatives of 'real America' and American democracy. The fears and anxieties prevalent among these constituencies about foreign economic competition, violent crime, mass migration, terrorism, cultural displacement, and political marginalisation, were thereby framed as the ontological insecurities of the nation itself, for example, in representing 'American carnage' as the collective experience of the United States in 2017 as Trump's inaugural address had done. This reframing of national identity through the collective insecurities of particular constituencies represents a novel approach to the analysis of the political performance of ontological security in IR beyond the nation state as reference point (Steele, 2008). However, it is important to note that the article does not claim to establish a direct line of causality between Trump's political rhetoric and employment of a populist security imaginary and collective decision-making and behavioural outcomes in a top-down fashion. Rather, the article seeks to identify a common narrative and affective interactive space shared between Trump and his followers that would serve as a common source of legitimisation, validation, and mutual reassurance that could both enable government policy and motivate contentious political action among populist voters, such as the Capitol riot on 6 January 2021.

The article proceeds as follows. First, it introduces the conceptual framework of a security imaginary as key set of ideational resources and identity performing discourses that inform political rhetoric, and which in nationalist populism result in a reframing of the concept of the national Self and the threatening Other. Second, the article explores the function of security narratives within this discursive process, and how the establishment of the roles of 'heroes' and 'villains' intersected with affective appeals to resentment, fear, and anxiety in the population, establishing a set of shared inter-subjective meanings between Trump in his role as President and populist speaker and his core voter base. Instead of performing the function of a unifying national vision in presidential rhetoric, the narrative of Trump as protector of the people targeted a core constituency of White working-class and non-college-educated voters in the American heartland, amplifying partisan polarisation and internal division for political gain. Trade and economic policy and immigration and border security are identified as two key policy areas that were framed in this fashion and that legitimated populist-informed policy changes, which were in turn fed back into an antagonistic security imaginary. Finally, the article explores how Trump assumed the role of defender of the nation in response to the Coronavirus pandemic, targeting China as existential threat to US national security, and linking the

geostrategic framework of America First to his populist re-election strategy in the 2020 presidential campaign.

‘Enemies of the People’: Othering and populist mobilisation

In IR, the relationship between populism and foreign policy has begun to attract more scholarly attention, in particular, since the twin populist shocks of Brexit and the election of Donald (Destradi and Plagemann, 2019; Stengel et al., 2019; Trump, 2016; Verbeek and Zaslove, 2017). Applying a critical understanding of identity discourses and security narrative to the study of contemporary populism in the United States includes, but also transcends Trump’s conduct of foreign policy and conceptualisation of the national interest (Lacatus and Meibauer, 2020; Skonieczny, 2021). It also goes beyond the question of whether a nationalist populist worldview of America First fulfils the requirements for an American grand strategy or Trump Doctrine (Dombrowski and Reich, 2017). A critical analysis of the populist security imaginary first involves identifying the idea of the Self in nationalist populist discourse, and how this particular identity is constituted through an amalgamation of the populist conceptualisation of the ‘people’ and the nationalist ideal of the ‘nation’. The foundational claim behind the concept of a security imaginary is that through practices of foreign policy and the (re)writing of security, the Inside is demarcated from the Outside, the threatened Self from the threatening Other (Campbell, 1992). American identity thus appears as a spatial-temporal and ideational process of the imagination constituted through discourses and practices that position the United States against the un-American Other: German imperialism and Nazism, Italian fascism, Japanese militarism, Soviet Communism, Islamist terrorism, and so on (Dalby, 2016; Hixson, 2008). Defining these threats constitutes the political community and justifies the existence of the political elites that lead it (Huysmans, 1998: 240).

These conceptual assumptions regarding security and identity have intellectual antecedents in the thinking of the political theorist Carl Schmitt, who defined politics as the differentiation between friend and enemy (Schmitt, 2015 [1932]). In invoking the Schmittian rhetoric of populist democracy and existential enmity, populist security narratives result in a significant expansion of the process of internal Othering, from traditionally marginalised communities and subjugated voices existing at the fringes of society, for example, the Othering of criminals in the ‘War on Drugs’ (Campbell, 1992: 214) to key institutions of liberal democracy seen as opposing populist claims to power and authority. In the case of Donald Trump, this significant expansion of internal Othering included populist attacks on judges and the courts (Epps, 2020), the press and ‘fake news’ media (Cobus, 2020), the military and intelligence services (Bowman, 2020; Schmidt and Barnes, 2019), and the democratic process itself, framed as tainted by systematic corruption and delegitimised through allegations of voter fraud on a mass level, including before and after the 2020 presidential election in the United States (Hasen, 2020). The crucial question here is the matter of inclusion and exclusion through discourse. The populist idea of the American Self is inscribed in the public realm as nexus of popular sovereignty and national identity that is explicitly directed against threatening Others – the ‘enemies of the American people’. As there is no inherent ontological quality to popular sovereignty, and populists reject existing representational mechanisms of liberal democracy to articulate the ‘will of the people’, populism requires a social construction of the ‘people’ as a sovereign agent that can wield and reclaim power through mobilisation and representation (Canovan, 2005: 89). Populism operates through acts of political mobilisation that

inspire the ‘people’ to act in opposition to the established order, framed as reclaiming popular sovereignty from the elites that have supposedly monopolised it (Jansen, 2011), reframing the meaning of the national Self around a new hegemonic popular identity in the process. As Roberts has emphasised, the power of populism lies in this ability to ‘wed antielite and antiestablishment discursive appeals to the political mobilization of the excluded and the alienated’ (Roberts, 2015: 142). The linkage of populist identity politics and ontological security emerges as driving force in this process. Prevalent fears and anxieties among particular constituencies about the loss of national sovereignty, cultural identity, political relevance, and economic decline in an increasingly globalised international system are exploited by populist actors and political entrepreneurs, who present their ideas as only viable alternative to the status quo and response to the people’s concerns. Examining the identity constructs targeting populist voters therefore entails critically analysing the wider cultural, ideological, and linguistic resources, the background capabilities and knowledges (Fairclough, 2001: 46–47; Milliken, 1999: 236), these identity constructs draw from, and the modes of political rhetoric through which they are communicated.

Dividing the nation: The emotive appeal of populist security narratives

A populist security imaginary links the key antagonistic narrative of a valiant ‘people’ and treacherous ‘elite’ to existential security threats that are associated with the existence and political responsibility of the latter. This populist framing centres on representing political issues from immigration to trade and economics to foreign and security policy through a discourse that facilitates recognition by, and mobilisation of populist voters and sidelines traditional elite conceptualisations of the national interest and public welfare. Existing research has emphasised the study of national security narratives as tool of strategic communication (Miskimmon et al., 2017) aimed at unifying national audiences behind a presidential geopolitical vision, for example, in framing the United States’ changing world political role and responsibilities during the Cold War (Krebs, 2015) and the War on Terror (Holland, 2012). Populist security narratives, instead, aim to amplify internal division and partisan polarisation, reinforcing a sense of ontological (in)security (Mitzen and Larson, 2017; Steele, 2008) among particular voters while prioritising their concerns over economic security, cultural identity, and personal safety in the public debate. A dispositional and emotive blame attribution, which vilifies corrupt and nefarious elites and holds them directly and personally responsible for the existential threats facing the people represents a narrative framing of political reality that has been shown to shape populist attitudes at the broader societal level (Busby et al., 2019; Hameleers et al., 2017). Humans are fundamentally ‘storytelling animals’, which strive to impose a logical interpretation of their external environment in order to make sense of their surroundings and their own sense of Self (Homolar, 2021; Krebs, 2015; Subotic, 2016; Wibben, 2010). Narratives are storytelling devices meant to establish meaning through providing a sense of ordered reality, and to evoke an emotional response in audiences. They assign the role of key characters of a story, linking the past, present, and future, thus imposing a structured order of events and providing a sense of logical coherence and chronological continuity (Suganami, 2008). A key component of security narratives in this process of identity formation and the orientation of audiences is the basic antagonism of the ‘heroes’ and ‘villains’ of the story through which concepts of national security are related to audiences,

and which have formed an essential part of security-centric presidential rhetoric in the United States (Homolar, 2021). This narrative ordering of reality in turn constitutes a sense of national belonging and historical groundedness as ontological security in audiences.

Populist security narratives link economic and socio-cultural insecurities as experienced by the popular community with the responsibility of knowingly and intentionally culpable elites rather than impersonal forces (Busby et al., 2019: 618); and they emotionalise political issues, emphasising resentment of elites, fear of alien Others, and anxiety over cultural and demographic changes in blaming the 'establishment' (Hameleers et al., 2017). Crucially, populist security narratives do not operate in a discursive vacuum but require shared inter-subjective meanings between speaker and audience in order to be effective. The sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild (2016: 48) has argued that a defining feature of the working-class members of the American right was a unifying set of 'deep stories'; narratives, which were felt rather than simply believed to be true, including resentment of the federal government and a sense of victimhood that defined the American right culturally. These narratives blamed liberal elites and government institutions for a profound sense of loss of home. In 2008, Barack Obama had controversially identified a prevalent sense of alienation and resentment among White working-class voters, which he saw as fueling support for a nationalist populist agenda: 'They get bitter, they cling to guns or religion or antipathy to people who aren't like them or anti-immigrant sentiment or anti-trade sentiment as a way to explain their frustrations' (Pilkington, 2008). Hillary Clinton's comment that dismissed half of Trump supporters as 'basket of deplorables', marked by 'racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, Islamophobic' views further reinforced the existence of a cultural dividing line separating voters in the United States in public discourse. Partisan polarisation resulted in an American electorate that was increasingly divided between ideologically opposing camps. Voter coalitions in the United States were separated by race, gender, level of education, and socio-economic status (Pew Research Center, 2014). The Republican coalition was predominantly made up of White, male, and older voters with a mid-level education and living in rural areas, while the Democratic coalition consisted of ethnic minorities, college-educated voters, urban populations, and women (Jacobson, 2016). In Donald Trump's White non-college-educated and working-class voter base in the South and the Midwest popular attitudes on immigration, the economy and the general direction of the country were diametrically opposed to those of supporters of the Democratic Party, expressing above average scores in categories such as nativism, sentiments of anger, mistrust of the federal government, and economic pessimism among others (Pew Research Center, 2016). In a series of public opinion polls, longitudinal surveys and ethnographic studies Trump voters expressed a combination of nativism, economic pessimism, and political alienation (Hochschild, 2016; Pew Research Center, 2018; Norris and Ingelhart, 2019; Rahn, 2019), which Trump sought to capitalise on through a nationalist populist rhetoric of anti-establishment anger, national restoration, trade protectionism, strict anti-immigration measures, and anti-globalism.

Trump's populist security narratives, in which he inevitably figured as the hero of the story, who had arrived to save and protect the 'real people' were therefore not meant to bring the nation together, but to appeal to a particular segment of the population, which was mostly older, White, male and socially conservative, concentrated in rural communities, suburbs and exurbs, and to whom a narrative of national disintegration, existential crisis and chaos seemed to have particular appeal. 'His stories were not Reaganesque,

filled with warmth and filigree. They were harsh, soulful, a punch in the face, not a gentle hand on the nation's shoulder' (Hart, 2020: 99). Departing from an aspirational and inspirational presidential rhetoric of 'hope and change', or a 'shining city upon a hill' meant to unify the country, Trump advanced a pessimistic narrative of 'American carnage' from the moment of his inauguration (Trump, 2017a). The visceral language of a nation threatened by decline and a multitude of enemies, both foreign and domestic, sought to mobilise populist voters by dividing American society into two polarising opposites, the 'real' pro-Trump America of the heartland, and the un-American Other out to destroy the country. As Trump explained during the 2020 presidential campaign:

A vote for Biden is a vote to hand the keys to government over to people who despise you and who want to rob your children of their American dream. That's what they're doing. A vote for Biden is a vote to give control of government over to the globalists, communists, socialists, the wealthy liberal hypocrites who want to silence, censor, cancel and punish you. (Trump, 2020a)

Trump sought to reinforce the positive affirmation between himself and his followers by ontologically reassuring them that he was fighting to protect their interests, culture, and values and to retain their claim to an idealised notion of the past United States, validating their sense of entitlement for continued socio-cultural primacy. Trump combined the roles of protector of the people and defender of the nation with that of a staunch culture warrior. In response to a series of mass protests against police brutality and racial injustice that had swept the United States in the wake of the murder of George Floyd in police custody, Trump therefore eschewed a rhetoric of empathy, national reconciliation, and the healing of historic wounds, instead targeting a leftist conspiracy. According to this narrative, a radical, dangerous enemy within threatened the traditional American way of life through socialism, anarchy, 'far-left fascism' (Trump, 2020b), and 'cultural Marxism'. As Trump proclaimed in the context of the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests, 'Angry mobs are trying to tear down statues of our Founders, deface our most sacred memorials, and unleash a wave of violent crime in our cities' (Trump, 2020b). This reactionary Law and Order narrative that linked Biden and the Democratic Party to socialists and anarchists threatening violence on the United States' streets also connected with audiences beyond Trump's core voter base and was linked to his improved standing among Latino voters in the 2020 presidential election, in particular, among anti-Communist Cuban-American voters in Florida (Viglucchi, 2020). In prioritising security and safety over societal change and claiming the role of uncompromising leader to defend a traditional way of life, Trump's divisive rhetoric embraced a set of authoritarian values that a significant number of populist voters shared and supported.

Trump as protector of the people from 'globalism'

Trump's populist rhetoric relied heavily on personalised narrative elements, which supported his branding as a political outsider to the corrupt Washington 'swamp', who alone was capable of protecting the people and renegotiating the 'bad deals' that had weakened and endangered the United States under Trump's Democratic and Republican predecessors, finally ending the 'long nightmare of American economic surrender' (Trump, 2020c) to its foreign rivals. Within this basic populist discourse of anti-elite antagonism, Trump's rhetoric framed the economic realm in general and global trade in particular as a source of profound ontological insecurity for working-class Americans, who had seen

their livelihoods disappear as a result of trade deals like North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), or the US-South Korean free trade agreement (KORUS). As Trump declared in his speech at the United Nations in 2017, multilateralism, globalisation, trade liberalisation, and international institutions were hurting ordinary Americans:

For too long, the American people were told that mammoth multinational trade deals, unaccountable international tribunals, and powerful global bureaucracies were the best way to promote their success. But as those promises flowed, millions of jobs vanished and thousands of factories disappeared. (Trump, 2017b)

The divide between economic versus cultural drivers of populism is controversially discussed in the academic literature in explaining the populist phenomenon in general and the rise of Trumpism in particular (Colantone and Stanig, 2019; Guiso et al. 2017; Norris and Inglehart, 2019; Rodrik, 2018). In the parlance of the economist Joseph Stiglitz (2016), the benefits of globalisation were distributed unevenly between ‘winners’, such as advancing economies in Asia and the global 1% and the ‘losers’, the middle and working classes in advanced economies in the West, which had seen a little to no real-time income gains for decades. NAFTA, a favourite target of Trump’s populist attacks on ‘bad deals’, had produced overall modest effects for most US workers, while an important minority had suffered substantial income losses as a result of outsourcing and the decline of manufacturing jobs. It was these ‘losers of globalization’ in the United States that Trump would directly address in his 2019 State of the Union speech: ‘I have met the men and women of Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Indiana, New Hampshire, and many other states whose dreams were shattered by the signing of NAFTA’ (Trump, 2019).

From an ontological perspective, however, it is more purposeful to think of economic and socio-cultural factors as interlinked in constituting the shared sentiments and affective experiences of populist voters, which populist entrepreneurs seek to engage with and manipulate through their narratives of insecurity (Gidron and Hall, 2017; Margalit, 2019; Skonieczny, 2018). In applying a narrative approach to the populist framing of policy issues and their emotive contextualisation as markers of social identity and status concerns (Kurer, 2020; Mutz, 2018; Salmela and von Scheve, 2017), the analytical focus accordingly shifts on how economic issues are socially constructed, rather than how factors like income inequality and macroeconomic shocks such as the Great Recession materialise as independent variables that cause populist outcomes. As Yotam Margalit (2019) observed, ‘[. . .] cultural distance and estrangement from the dominant groups in society are intertwined with people’s perception of being economically left behind’. Racial anxieties, perceptions of relative decline and social marginalisation within an established hierarchy, and hostility against out-groups perceived as less deserving than one’s own in-group can act as a powerful motivator to act against the status quo through embracing the security imaginary of populism and its political programme.

Several ethnographic studies have pointed in this context to social marginalisation and resentment as shared conviction of truth underwriting the effectiveness and affective appeal of ontological narratives of socio-economic insecurity between Trump and his core target audience (Cramer, 2016; Hochschild, 2016; Wuthnow, 2019). A narrative of victimisation at the hand of foreign Others that was experienced materially and internalised emotionally was advanced both on the systemic level, in that foreign competitors and imports of steel and aluminium from China, Canada, and the European Union (EU) were

identified as strategic threat to US national security, and ontologically as endangering the livelihood and sense of self-worth of individual Americans working in traditional manufacturing and energy sectors. In line with appeals to a nostalgic reimagination of the United States and the restoration of past national greatness ('Make America Great Again'), Trump thereby expressed a retrograde understanding of the economy, a 'Norman Rockwell view of America' (Woodward, 2018: 136) in the words of Gary Cohn, Trump's chief economic advisor. Trump emphasised the use of fossil fuels and traditional manufacturing industries like steel and construction, and largely ignored the United States' global leadership in communication and information technologies and services, prioritising economic sectors with a strong cultural presence in the American heartland, such as coalmining in Appalachia, car manufacturing in Michigan, and steel works in Ohio. A narrative of shared suffering and humiliation, and just retaliation against their common internal and external enemies would reinforce the affective bond and mutual ontological reassurance between populist speaker and audience:

We stared down the unholy alliance of lobbyists and donors and special interests, who made a living, bleeding our country dry. [. . .] We broke down the doors of Washington backrooms, where deals were cut to close our companies, give away your jobs, shut down our factories, and surrender your sovereignty and your very way of life, and we've ended it. (Trump, 18 June 2019)

Despite numerous bankruptcies and a fortune whose foundation was inherited wealth, Trump had successfully cultivated the heroic persona of successful business tycoon and supreme dealmaker in the public image for decades through his ghostwritten best-selling memoir, *Trump: The Art of the Deal* (1987), and the reality TV-show *The Apprentice*, which he had hosted for 14 seasons on the NBC network (2003–2015). As one voter in Ohio remarked, this media-created image was intrinsically linked to Trump's populist aura as saviour and protector of the people:

We thought that with Trump and his policies, he was going to protect us [. . .]. I voted for him. I watched *The Apprentice*. I loved that show. That's kind of person I wanted. I thought that's the guy who's going to keep my job another four to eight years. [. . .] I thought he would support blue-collar people. (Greenhouse, 2020, emphasis added)

Beyond the heroic depiction of Trump as protector and saviour of the people from economic ruin, the narration of individual anecdotes about the victimisation of innocent, ordinary Americans at the hands of vicious criminals and terrorists invoked the main antagonist of the villainous 'illegal immigrant' as an enemy of the people in American life:

All across our nation, innocent Americans have been killed by illegal immigrant criminals who should never have been in our country. [. . .] 90 year-old Earl Olander was brutally beaten to death in his home by illegal immigrants with criminal records and left on the floor of his home to die. (Trump, 2016)

[. . .] as I travelled all across this country, I met with many American families whose loved ones were viciously and violently killed by illegal immigrants because our Government refused to enforce our already existing laws. These American victims were ignored by the media. They were ignored by Washington. (Trump, 2017c)

Trump's populist security narratives simplified, amplified, and dramatised popular sentiments of ontological insecurity among his followers, framing immigration almost exclusively through the lens of violent crime, terrorism, and existential threat. Analogous to import bans legitimated on grounds of national security, the so-called 'Muslim ban' would translate this populist narrative into concrete policy outcomes, targeting immigration from majority Muslim countries under the guise of counter-terrorism efforts to protect the American people. Executive Order 13769 was accordingly titled 'Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States', while the 2017 *National Security Strategy of the United States* made safeguarding the homeland, territory, and borders of the United States explicitly dependent on immigration reform (White House, 2017).

In his rhetorical strategy of vilification, demonisation, and fearmongering of alien Others, Trump thereby frequently resorted to emotion-filled representations of victimhood, referring to 'countless innocent Americans', 'grieving mothers and fathers', and American families whose 'loved ones' had been killed by 'illegal immigrants' in a vicious and violent fashion. This imaginary of shared victimisation and injustice invoked the locale of an innocent heartland and its people as a mythologised space that had fallen victim to foreign aggression, alien invasion, and complicitous elites at home. In Trump's emotionally charged narrative of lost American innocence, dangerous weakness, and righteous anger, a rampant wave of crime and terrorism perpetrated by 'illegal immigrants' was following a historical continuum 'from 9/11 to Boston to San Bernardino'. Through the narrative construct of a nation and people living in fear, victimised by vicious outsiders, 'illegal immigration' was framed as an existential threat prevailing both on the level of national security and in the everyday lives of ordinary Americans. Trump's visceral stories of immigrant enmity, however, ran directly counter to official statistics and government data that documented a sharp decline of violent crime in the United States overall (Gramlich, 2019a) and showed that Latin American migrants were less likely than US citizens to commit violent crimes, with no significant general link between 'illegal immigration' and violent crime itself (Flagg, 2019). Nevertheless, in 18 of 22 Gallup surveys conducted between 1993 and 2018, at least 6 in 10 Americans said there was more crime in the United States than the year before (Gramlich, 2019a).

This suggests that Trump's populist linkage of security narratives and simplistic anti-immigration and border security policies ('Build the Wall', 'Muslim ban') helped to reinforce a subjective perception of insecurity and vulnerability among Republican voters. In reinforcing and politicising this imaginary realm, Trump's populist rhetoric in particular aimed to capitalise on sentiments of public opinion according to which three-quarters of Republican voters declared illegal immigration to be 'a very big problem' in the United States (Gramlich, 2019b), and that showed Trump voters being markedly more likely than other groups of voters to prioritise the threats posed to their lives by criminals, terrorists, and illegal immigrants (Bump, 2021). In constructing this populist amalgam of national security threats, economic resentment, cultural alienation, and fear for personal safety, Trump relied primarily on 'alternative facts' and a post-truth rhetoric rather than evidence-based reasoning (Shear et al. 2019). According to Trump's erstwhile campaign manager and White House chief strategist Steve Bannon, it was this emotionalisation that explained the electoral success of Trump and his brand of American populism in 2016: 'We got elected on "Drain the Swamp," "Lock Her Up," "Build a Wall." This was pure anger. Anger and fear is what gets people to the polls' (Kakutani, 2018: 126). The

prominent American neo-Nazi and White supremacist, Richard Spencer, analogously identified Trump's affective rhetoric as a key for his appeal to the alt-right:

It's not so much about policy, it's more about the emotions that he evokes. And emotions are more important than policy, emotions are more important than fact. [...] he (Trump) expresses such nationalism and togetherness that no other candidate has expressed. (Neiwert, 2017: 288)

Trump's emotionalised post-truth performance and 'intentional wrongness persuasion' (Woodward, 2020: 256), both sought to delegitimise domestic opposition to his political authority – rejecting official findings of Russian interference with the 2016 US presidential as 'hoax' and partisan 'witch hunt' – and to galvanise popular support for the nationalist populist worldview and policy agenda of America First among his followers.

America First and the framing of the pandemic: Geopolitical narratives as domestic mobilisation device

In Trump's populist security imaginary, the international sphere appeared as a zero-sum arena in which the United States had to compete against all other actors in order to secure its own survival and prosperity, regardless if these competitors were liberal democracies or authoritarian regimes. As Trump (2017b) declared before the United Nations General Assembly in 2017: 'As President of the United States, I will always put America first, just like you, as the leaders of your countries, will always, and should always, put your countries first'. America First established a Manichean distinction between nationalist populism and Trump's 'principled realism' (White House 2017) and the 'false song of globalism', while, at the same time, articulating a geopolitical vision of Jacksonian unilateralism and military supremacy that represented long-standing convictions of the Republican Party (Cha, 2016; Löfflmann, 2019). In the wake of the outbreak of the Coronavirus pandemic, this fusion of populist anti-globalism and nationalist unilateralism manifested as an increasingly hostile anti-China rhetoric. In targeting China as an existential enemy in a 'new Cold War', the antagonistic framing of America First thereby bridged the political divide between arch-populists like Bannon and quintessential GOP establishment figures like Newt Gingrich (Rogin, 2019). As with Trump's premature, misleading or outright false claims that the United States had defeated ISIS, or that the nuclear threat from North Korea had been eliminated under his watch, policies formulated in response to the coronavirus crisis were predominantly used as perception framing device.

Trump's narrative and political response to the pandemic was meant to bolster the public image of the President as a 'winner', who protected the American people against a world of foreign enemies, strategic rivals, and geopolitical foes. The unprecedented scope and severity of the global COVID-19 pandemic that came to dominate international politics and media headlines in 2020 thus acted as a catalyst that exposed the discursive dynamic of Trump's populist security imaginary. In the words of Trump's National Security Advisor Robert O'Brien, the novel virus represented the biggest threat to US national security under the Trump presidency (Woodward, 2020: xiii). In blaming China directly for the outbreak of the virus in the United States, Trump's combination of post-truth rhetoric, conspiratorial speculations, and a narrative of existential crisis emanating from beyond the United States' borders were mutually reinforcing elements in seeking to

mobilise Republican voters in the 2020 presidential campaign through the antagonistic core logic of populist geopolitics.

In his public announcements, Trump repeatedly identified the novel coronavirus as ‘Chinese virus’ and ‘foreign virus’, a framing replicated by a number of high-ranking Republican politicians, including Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. The President’s deployment of ‘strategic racism’ (López, 2019) associated a global health crisis with a threat to national security emerging from a foreign alien Other, attributing blame and mobilising anger and resentment both horizontally and outward, in pointing to the political responsibility and misinformation campaign by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and vertically and inward, in attacking the ‘political correctness’ of the Democratic Party and the liberal media establishment for accusing the President of racism and xenophobia in promoting his anti-China narrative. Once again, the populist security imaginary targeted both internal and external ‘enemies of the people’ in its policy legitimisation and voter mobilisation. Trump’s antagonistic rhetoric of a ‘Chinese virus’ was tailored to reflect and reinforce the political attitudes, social values, and xenophobic prejudices of his core supporters, including a pronounced hostility towards China and generally low levels of trust in mainstream US media among Republican voters (Montanaro, 2020). Trump’s vilification of China was aimed to resonate emphatically with these voters, while an emotionalised contextualisation of the pandemic through xenophobic resentment and performative indignation, at the same time, provided the discursive space to legitimate retaliatory policies in the international sphere. These included initiatives for economic decoupling, demands for billions of US dollars in financial compensation from China, and exerting pressure on US allies to exclude the Chinese technology giant Huawei from the development of 5G networks in their countries. Trump’s blame attribution and antagonistic framing in relation to COVID-19 discursively deflected responsibility for the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Americans away from the President onto a foreign Other, who intentionally sought to cause harm to the true people.

This narrative shift actively contributed to a growing anti-China momentum in the administration as well as the Republican Party more broadly, and was rhetorically and politically supported by leading officials and conservative national security hawks like Pompeo and Deputy National Security Advisor Matthew Pottinger. The 2017 *National Security Strategy* had already identified China as a ‘revisionist power’ and emphasised a global strategic environment of great power competition in line with Trump’s America First credo (White House, 2017). Pottinger, an outspoken China critic, who had been centrally involved in drafting the National Security Strategy (NSS) document, had originally coined the term ‘Wuhan virus’, describing the pandemic as unique opportunity for the United States to more forcefully oppose an increasingly totalitarian Chinese regime under President Xi Jinping. China had restricted intra-Chinese travel after the Coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan, but not outgoing travel to Europe or the United States, which was seen in the Trump administration as a deliberate act to target the West. According to O’Brian, China was using the pandemic to ‘gain a geopolitical advantage over the United States and the free world’ and to replace the US as the ‘leading power in the world’ (Woodward, 2020: 333). The Trump administration’s new China strategy, released in 2020, emphasised this basic antagonism, describing China in starkly Manichean terms as challenging the ‘bedrock American belief in the unalienable right of every person to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness’ (White House, 2020).

A narrative of ideological and geopolitical confrontation expanded on the power-centric *realpolitik* vision promoted through the 2017 National Security Strategy and

2018 *National Defense Strategy*, framing strategic competition with a revisionist China as an existential contest between American democracy and Beijing's nationalist technocracy, further embedding it in the antagonistic worldview of Trump's populist security imaginary. Stiffening ideological opposition to China in Trump's own nationalist rhetoric and among key members of the national security establishment in the spring of 2020 were thereby mirrored in hardening public opinion polls. These indicated that Americans' views of China were turning increasingly negative following the coronavirus outbreak, in particular, among Republicans; in March 2020, three in four GOP voters held an unfavourable view of the country whereas 62% of Americans overall perceived China as a 'major threat', marking a significant increase of 14 percentage points between 2018 and 2019 (Devlin et al., 2020). In an email to supporters, Donald Trump's re-election campaign sought to directly capitalise on this development by reinforcing a security narrative of the pandemic as an existential crisis brought upon the country by a foreign enemy: 'America is under attack – not just by an invisible virus, but by the Chinese' (Edsall, 2020). On an ontological level, this antagonistic narrative thereby manifested internally in the stigmatisation of Asians and Asian-Americans in the United States with reports of individuals being verbally and physically assaulted for supposedly spreading the virus (Rogers et al., 2020). According to one survey, 30% of Americans and 60% of Asian-Americans had witnessed anti-Asian discrimination since the outbreak of the pandemic (Ellerbeck, 2020). A study in the *American Journal of Public Health* concluded that 'anti-Asian sentiment depicted in tweets containing the term "Chinese Virus" likely perpetuated racist attitudes' (Reja, 2021), paralleling incidents of anti-Asian hate crimes in the United States since the outbreak of the pandemic. In taking recourse in the mechanisms of emotionalisation, blame attribution, and Othering, Trump's response to the pandemic once again documented the dual role of populist security narratives that interlinked the legitimisation of antagonistic policies aimed at 'enemies of the people' with the partisan mobilisation of domestic audiences, actively dividing both world politics and American society into hostile camps as a result.

Conclusion

The analytical framework of a security imaginary allows identifying the interplay between emotive and narrative elements within populist rhetoric, and how they interlink with policy outcomes and voter appeals in the context of international politics. In employing the populist security narratives of protector of the people from economic devastation and Marxist cultural revolution and defender of the nation against dangerous foreign aliens, Donald Trump discursively represented a political reality that simplified policy issues, dramatised conflict, and constantly assigned blame to internal and external 'enemies of the people'. In constructing the security imaginary of America First, Trump successfully weaponised trade and immigration policy as key issues in an American *Kulturkampf* over popular sovereignty and national identity, while his response to the Coronavirus pandemic deliberately targeted China as a foreign adversary, reinforcing a growing geopolitical antagonism that reflected and amplified both the hardening views of the US national security establishment and shifting popular attitudes in the United States. In appealing to sentiments of economic anxiety, cultural alienation, fear for personal safety, nativist resentment, and xenophobia, Trump was consistently holding on to a steady level of support of more than 40% of the electorate, which supported his America First policy agenda,

maintaining approval ratings of more than 80% among Republican voters over most of his presidency (Dunn, 2020).

An analysis of post-election polls suggests that Donald Trump lost the 2020 presidential election in particular due to an erosion of support over his handling of the pandemic among White suburban voters (Haberman, 2021). However, more than 74 million Americans opted to support him as President, the second-highest vote count in American election history after his victorious Democratic opponent Joe Biden. A far-cry from a wholesale repudiation of nationalist populism in the United States, the election outcome reconfirmed not only the existence of deep divisions in American society but also an electorate polarised over key policy issues from combating climate change to immigration reform and racial inequality. This suggests the continued viability of populist security narratives aimed at amplifying internal division as an effective strategy for voter mobilisation beyond Trumpism and the United States itself. At the same time, in firmly establishing a security narrative of an antagonistic international environment, marked by great power rivalry and ideological confrontation with China, America First, (re)established an enmity-centric framing device to legitimate US foreign policy choices and the United States' role in the world in the public realm likely to endure beyond the Trump presidency.

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