

# Trump's Foreign Policy Agenda is Anything but Isolationism

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***Abstract:** It is a common narrative among politicians and political experts that Trump's foreign policy is turning the US inwards and abandoning its global leadership: i.e. what we now are witnessing is a new form of isolationism. However, if you look at the administration's vision and strategy, you won't find isolation, but rather an active foreign policy, including the desire of a continued global supremacy. It is perhaps a more unilateral approach, but at the same time it is following a pattern in US foreign policy that we should pay more attention to, namely how every administration is using the opportunity to expand US spheres of influence when possible. This is done by re-formulating its global role and the means to achieve it. This paper will focus on the ways Trump's election and his "America First" policies and the administration's National Security Strategy (NSS) are part of a broader pattern that is often ignored.*

***Keywords:** Foreign policy, U.S. National Security Strategy (NSS), isolationism, Donald Trump*

## Introduction

Mr. Trump's critics have charged that his 'America First' strategy reflects a retreat from global leadership. I see it fundamentally differently, Mr. Trump recognizes the importance of American leadership but also of American sovereignty. That means Mr. Trump is prepared to be disruptive when the U.S. finds itself constrained by arrangements that put America, and American workers, at a disadvantage. His task is to reform rules that no longer are fair and equitable while maintaining the important historical relationships with Europe and the countries in Asia that are truly our partners.

Many of the economic and diplomatic structures Mr. Trump stands accused of undermining, were developed in the aftermath of World War II. Back then, they made sense for America. But in the post-Cold War era, amid a resurgence of geopolitical competition, I think President Trump has properly identified a need for a reset.

Mr. Trump is suspicious of global institutions and alliances, many of which he believes are no longer paying dividends for the U.S. When I watch President Trump give guidance to our team, his question is always, ‘How does that structure impact America?’ The president isn’t interested in how a given rule may have impacted America in the ’60s or the ’80s, or even the early 2000s, but rather how it will enhance American power in 2018 and beyond.

And the president’s agenda, is one of extraordinary ambition: to rewrite the rules of world order in America’s favor!

*Summary of an interview with Mike Pompeo in June 2018, by Walter Russell Mead*

In recent years, many prominent political pundits have claimed that President Donald Trump is turning the US inward and retreating from the world stage. As Ted Galen Carpenter, among many others, pointed out, an increasingly popular accusation among the U.S. foreign-policy establishment is that Donald Trump’s administration is abandoning America’s global leadership role and “placing the country into an isolationist cocoon” (Carpenter 2019). It might be true that Trump is more inclined to ‘go alone’ if necessary, but he is not isolating the US from the world stage. Instead he is doing quite the opposite. In this article I will argue that Trump in fact is following a pattern of *progressive continuity* in US foreign policy where he is expanding US spheres of influence and its dominance by adjusting to new circumstances: i.e. he uses, new means to keep its supremacy. In that perspective the US has never isolated itself but, instead, at different times has acted more or less unilaterally. Although unpredictable and inconsistent, Trump’s vision, expressed in his National Security Strategy 2017, is about re-writing the world order to the advantage of US interests. He is perhaps using partly paleo-conservative ideas, but the neo-conservatives in Washington have used the opportunity to once again ensure they are in the game.

Looking more closely at Trump’s national security agenda, one finds an aggressive foreign policy that follows a long-standing pattern. Thus, Trump’s “Make America Great Again” and “America First” means keeping the dominant role previous administrations created by the means Trump finds vital in a new global era. This paper will focus on a broader pattern that is often ignored. That is, since WWII and even before, when the U.S. faced international challenges and domestic social upheaval, whether caused by economic or military shifts or when it was morally questioned (mainly after wars such as with Vietnam and Iraq), influential thinkers such as liberal interventionists and neo-conservatives have created a successful narrative. Repeatedly, they have claimed that America is threatened and

needs a more confrontational approach towards the outside world to retain its leadership role, on its own terms. For example, this ensued with the Willet Report in 1946, Nitze NSC-68, Wohlstetter Strategic Doctrine in the 1960s, the Team B Report in 1976 and the Wolfowitz Report in 1992. But the list is much longer (Stranne 2011).

This means that after periods of restraint, which follow long wars and/or when some threat has emerged, Washington hawks have repeatedly used the fear of an American decline and the sense of lost faith in the future as a mobilizing force for a more confrontational approach internationally. Both the narrative and the means for change have been formulated differently each time (adjusted to the circumstances) but with the same content and goal. Trump's specific answer to what many consider was a failure for Obama is perhaps *not* to put troops on the ground somewhere for strategic reasons as Bush did after 9/11 but rather to re-build the world economic order in favor of America. Trump, with help from his advisors and policy-makers, links together his business-oriented practices with both domestic and foreign policy strategies to adjust *his* interpretation of how the country can keep its supremacy. He does not, as neo-conservatives generally do, connect foreign engagement with promoting democracy militarily, as a first or even second alternative, but he has shown his willingness to use military force if necessary, and even put nuclear weapons on the table to threaten his adversaries.

Moreover, a brief look at history shows the U.S. has never isolated itself, although many scholars argue there have been periods of isolation. Rather, it has always acted strategically to maintain or expand its power (Braumoeller 2010; Gaddis 2005; McDougall 1997; Mead 2001). Thus, Trump's behavior should be explored in a broader perspective of an ever-ongoing evolution of U.S. strength, where, over time, it has expanded its spheres of influence. Sometimes it opts for a multilateral approach, working closely with allies; at other times, while it does not *openly* become involved in other nations' affairs, it instead uses covert operations and/or political pressure on both friends and foes (Blum 1998; Johnson 2002). Trump takes it even further by indicating the US doesn't have to excuse itself for putting America First and acting to suit its interests.

### **The myth about isolationism**

The idea of the U.S. isolating itself from time to time is a common one. In many articles, various administrations or presidents have been described as

isolationist, meaning they haven't sought to police the world or engage in other countries' affairs. But the actual policy has never been about *isolating* the US (Braumoeller 2010). Instead, the concept of isolation was formed in the early age of the new country as a statement about American superiority vis-a-vis all other nations. Having adopted this philosophy, it did not need to cooperate internationally if it meant risking its exceptional role or becoming more vulnerable than it already was, surrounded by the major powers of the time. In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the U.S. founders sought to build its security by constraining other nations' foreign policy ambitions in the western Hemisphere and preventing them from assuming influence in the region. The idea about isolation can be seen as a legacy of George Washington, who said that the US should only trust itself; also, that cooperation with others should only be sought if it benefits the U.S. (Kagan 2006; Washington 1796). However, *isolation* in this context should only be regarded as America's privilege to define its rules in international affairs, not isolate itself from the world. Both George Washington and John Adams expressed the notion of genuine independence as that which involved seclusion from all European interests and creating its own form of security (Bemis 1949).

However, isolation as an explicit idea and especially as a practice has never existed more than perhaps during the 1930s and the period between the two wars (Gaddis 2005; McDougall 1997; Mead 2001), if even then (Braumoeller 2010). Instead, the strong wish to strengthen its security, develop its foreign trade, and access resources around the world has continually caused Washington to compromise its idea about distancing itself from others (Hietala 1985). In fact, even in its earliest years, the U.S. launched an unbounded capitalism which required completely different structures and strategies (than isolation). And, during less combative periods, there were always troops on almost every continent, ships on every sea, and lively international relations (Mead 2001). Indeed, domestic and foreign policy were deeply entwined from the very beginning.

A more accurate description of U.S. foreign policy, historically, is therefore to say it has acted *unilaterally*, without considering or involving other countries, whenever necessary. In the earliest years, it was about pragmatism and self-preservation. A young and vulnerable country surrounded by great powers had the best chance to survive if it stayed out of conflicts (Kagan 2006). But the moment it was strong enough to adopt a more aggressive

attitude, it did. And while the first decades were committed to expansion in the new continent, (which involved eradicating the indigenous people), U.S. global influence expanded continuously, foremost in the Caribbean and Pacific Ocean, often by conducting small scale wars (Boot 2002). Analyzing U.S. global adventures also requires including low-intensive wars, minor military operations and preventive military actions. For example, between 1800 and 1934, the U.S. fleet landed 180 times on foreign soil (Boot 2002) and its regime-change strategies during the 20<sup>th</sup> century continued unabated (Blum 1986; Koeppel 2018).

The argument about isolation was created mainly to avoid being an active participant in the conflicts between major European powers. Overall, the unilateral behavior was an absolute goal - to never allow U.S. security to be subordinated to other powers. This logic created an incentive to answer militarily to any conceivable threats. And, as it always considered itself threatened and vulnerable, it justified its behavior to protect its borders and expand its spheres of influence. In fact, during the entire 19<sup>th</sup> century, a mutually reinforcing segment of ideas was created which established a foreign- and security policy agenda to prevent anything to stand in the way of U.S. expansion in the Western Hemisphere (i.e. the Monroe Doctrine). The pursuit of hegemony became an amendment to the American unilateral security strategy (Gaddis 2005).

### **Progressive continuity and how Trump fits into a larger pattern**

Instead of analyzing US foreign politics by periods of active engagement or restraint, US foreign policy should be understood as an ever-ongoing *progressive continuity* where America has continually expanded its spheres of influence. This is because the basic ideas on which the country was founded—individual freedom and self-ownership—combined with all the opportunities the new continent offered, created an *expansionary logic*. These founding ideas deepened the expansionary logic by adding new ideas to its core over time, such as Manifest Destiny and the self-made-man, which demanded access to new markets and gave their advocates a justifiable motive. That is not to say it was a master-mind-conspiracy for dominance, but rather a perfect combination of political ideas and opportunities that created the reason for expansion and later, dominance, as the most rational developments. However, when the expansion has been questioned because of its

reliance on military adventures, or when domestic social unrest has jeopardized America's stability and/or economic system, some intellectuals have successfully re-formulated America's global goals and the necessary means to achieve it. This often by legitimizing a more aggressive agenda regarding foreign policy (Stranne 2011). Thus, when domestic circumstances have required a political change that has coincided with, for example, the need for access to new markets, then the foreign policy has been re-formulated to ensure that the US can secure its economic interests abroad. Often this course has been wrapped in a narrative and justified as part of the US "mission in the world" and by including its exceptionalism, its destiny and its quest for absolute security (Weinberg 1958). All of these are core ideas in the "American self" that have served as mutually reinforcing elements and created this expansionary logic. Further, this logic created a pretext for the U.S. to often act pre-emptively to secure its interests (Weinberg 1958; Weston 1972).

At times, this has meant a more cooperative policy based on strong alliances and international institutions, and at others a more confrontational approach. However, it has often been about using appropriate strategies to expand US *spheres of influence* and later on its supremacy. For example, it intervened more actively in the Caribbean (e.g. Puerto Rico) and the Pacific (e.g. Guam and Hawaii) in the late 1800s and early 1900s with different strategies. While it avoided traditional forms of colonialism, it invented a new form of economic dominance (Kagan 2006; McDougall 1997; Stephenson 1995). Militarily it has sometimes meant either proxy war strategies or covert military operations, and at other times overt military interventions. However, periods more dominated by *covert* military operations have sometimes co-mingled with isolation when in fact it has been about playing smart without committing to engagement in which various institutions in Washington do not have control or avoiding the risk of too costly and long wars when these have not been regarded as necessary. But, as mentioned above, when liberal interventionists or neo-conservatives saw any administration as too soft on various threats or not pursuing the US dominant role, they have successfully presented reports, strategies or roadmaps that administrations had adopted to retake the American initiative and expand its influence.

However, U.S. dominance became threatened long before Trump entered the stage, and his administration has been, in the same way as administrations before him, reacting to a changing world which requires new strategies

to continue U.S. hegemonic power, although with changed methods. Thus, the US aims to maintain a global system with whatever means are needed, just as it has done every time its dominance has been challenged (Gardner 2008; Harvey 2005; Kolko 1969; Layne 2006). The fact that America (during its relatively short existence) has become an unprecedented superpower has allowed it, during recent decades, to reject compromises. To convince allies and foes of its dominance, it has adopted covert and overt military strategies or agreements that ensure the U.S. retains its supremacy. When threatened by domestic unrest as in the 1960s and 1970s or changed global structures (following WWII or 9/11), the hawks have effectively used these periods to promote a more aggressive agenda.

Thus, the social, political and economic unrest that preceded Trump's victory have allowed the hawks to again co-opt the instability and insecurity to create a narrative for how the country can maintain its supremacy in a new global environment. By examining the decades that preceded Trump's victory, one can see that his foreign policies are linked to domestic factors and continue the patterns described above.

### **Social unrest paves the way for Trump and a new foreign policy strategy**

When Trump entered the political stage in 2015, his message encapsulated the sentiments among many. But although his victory surprised most experts, neither the social developments nor the growing hopelessness and 'distrust in the future' that Trump exploited, was shrouded in mystery. Rather they have been described very well by, for example by Robert Putnam in "Our Kids – The American Dream in Crises" (2015). Also, report after report has showed that many people from all social classes (except the super-rich), expressed uncertainty about the country's ability to provide a prosperous future. A majority among lower income classes said they felt left behind, and surprisingly many among all income classes said they questioned the American dream (PEW Report 2007).

The fact that the American dream was questioned was critical, since it had been a key factor for the country's strong economic development since the end of World War II. Indeed, part of the country's relative political stability was built on the fact that people had faith in the system and its ability to re-organize its workforce when needed. Even more important, Americans have, far less than in Europe, blamed the government if they, as individuals, failed, or blamed social welfare policies, if the system failed. That

is, they had long believed that if you worked hard enough, you could enjoy the American dream; and if you failed, it was your own fault. Further, when this belief is questioned, the result can be instability. Obama even expressed the notion of a country where anything is possible in his 2010 national security strategy, presenting it as an important part of what constitutes America and what he thought was urgent to uphold for security reasons (NSS 2010). However, his legacy ended differently and many were disappointed about what he had *not* achieved. Now, Trump claims that he is the right person to make sure the country is moving in the right direction again and underlines what Obama's NSS pointed out—that the US must keep its Number One economic status.

Moreover, the sentiments described by Putnam and in various reports, were not only about a *sense* of lost identity or a lost dream: from 2000 to 2014, approximately five million manufacturing jobs disappeared. In the age of globalization and the new technological/digital economy, many saw their workplaces move abroad and learned that their workplace experiences and education no longer counted for much in the new marketplace. Besides the lost jobs, the 'collapse' of the banking system and housing market in 2008 left many in bankruptcy. Although the economy recovered faster and more profoundly than during the Great Depression, it still translates into extremely difficult times for many Americans, since wages have still not grown significantly. In fact, most workers' real wages (after inflation is considered) have barely budged for decades. According to a 2014 PEW Research Center report, the year before Trump announced his campaign, income had been flat or even falling for over four decades in the US (PEW 2014), which confirms the numbers, negative trends and developments discussed by scholars such as Thomas Piketty in "*Capital in the Twenty First Century*" (2013).

By 2004, well *before* the 2008 crash, only 41 percent of Americans thought they had a better life than five years earlier and 31 percent said their situation was worse, which was the highest number measured in half a century. Since 2010, 60 percent of Americans stated in various surveys that they thought the US was headed in a wrong direction (Polling Report). At the same time, US income inequality is the highest since 1928 (Desilver 2013).

Survey after survey also found that the American people and the conservatives in particular didn't trust Washington. In early 2015, only 25 percent of voters felt they could trust the government according to PEW Research



Institute (PEW 2015). Moreover, many Americans in recent years have said the country is losing its dominance in world politics—noting that a country such as China is “*coming from behind*,” threatening the U.S. economy and military might. For people accustomed to valuing their country’s strength, the lost initiative in world politics (real or imagined) is a threat to their core.

These conditions threaten the political stability and most importantly, pave the way for actors who want to push a narrative for a new *global agenda* by using the same kind of logic promoted throughout history.

Besides, some within the majority “white” group also see their power challenged by other groups such as blacks and latinos (PRRI) and for *some* that has meant directing their frustration towards minorities. The fact that ‘white’ as a category, according to the Brooking Institute, will be the minority by 2045 frightens some who are used to being part of a majority with a favored position. In fact, since President Obama took office in January 2009, racist groups have been more open and racist expressions have become more common, even ‘accepted’ in a way many would have thought was consigned to the history books (Kirk 2017). During the Obama era, one could hear more strident tones, even hateful, for each year he was president; and, the conservative party did nothing to counteract this trend (Pelosi 2018). This development helps explain why Trump’s (economic) agenda is closely linked with a nationalist approach, and why it’s possible for him to connect to the alt-right movement and merge it into a new form of unilateral foreign policy. As he stated at the United Nations in 2017, “*Now we are calling for a great reawakening of nations, for the revival of their spirits, their pride, their people, and their patriotism*” (Trump 2017).

### **Re-formulate the means to keep U.S. supremacy**

Thus, when Trump’s campaign promoted this message, linking it to the feelings of despair, and when he promised to make the American dream real again, and even more importantly, to make America what it once was – it seemed as he could become the next president. Also, based on my previous studies about neo-conservative think tanks (Stranne 2014), I found it was even more likely that influential thinkers and the hawks would try to capitalize on these sentiments and *re-model them* into their vision for a new American global approach—taking advantage of a newly elected president with no foreign policy experience and adjusting their world view to his agenda. For his part, Trump would do the same, linking his agenda to theirs.

Furthermore, after Trump's first year in office, it was apparent that he was about to re-formulate the means to keep U.S. supremacy, which fits well into a larger pattern.

There are several actions Trump has taken during his first two years in office which show he is dedicated to re-shaping international agreements and institutions. These include withdrawing from the Paris Agreement, TTIP and NAFTA, slapping tariffs on steel and aluminum, and pressuring US allies and NATO, to name a few. A closer look at the National Security Strategy (NSS) from December 2017 (the only security strategy written during a president's first year in office) also presents a steadfast and more unilateral direction. It is divided into four parts, whose titles relate to what was described above.

1. Protect the American People, the Homeland, and *the American Way of Life*
2. Promote American Prosperity
3. Preserve Peace through Strength
4. Advance American Influence (NSS 2017)

Nadia Schadlow, former Deputy National Security Advisor for Strategy for the Trump Administration and the author of the Security Strategy, presents what "America first" means in practice. She stated in an interview that the NSS describes how those who conceived it think the world looks today, which is a *competitive* place where the U.S. is losing ground in many different areas (Schadlow in Spycast, May 2018). She also stressed that security is not just about preserving America's military position and advantages but maybe even more importantly, preserving America's position in business and innovation (Ibid) to secure its position on the global stage. The challenge, she noted, is to get the American people to understand that the nation needs to change direction and also to remember who we are, what role we have to play in the world, re-formulating the American destiny and the means to maintain its dominant role.

The NSS has also been well received at conservative think tanks such as the Heritage Foundation. It is said to define the new reality and the interests the US and its allies share, specifically naming countries like Great Britain, Israel, Poland, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Japan, and South Korea as those who interpret the challenges in a similar manner. "*It sets a roadmap for the US*

*to stay as the leading actor in the world” says Nile Gardiner. At the same time, he warns that; “America could lose its role in the future if we do not adjust to the present logic. //...// The NSS accepts that we are heading towards a more bi-polar world but Trump’s investments in the military and his re-negotiation of bad treaties tells us that the U.S. will still be the strongest. Re-building our military and economic investments and a new approach to the international system is a way to consolidate America’s supremacy- namely put America first.” (Gardiner 2017).*

The logic expressed in the NSS and among those who favor its content, is part of Trump’s worldview and derives from the notion that was repeated during the campaign; namely that the US was losing the initiative in world politics and now needs to take a bolder and more aggressive stance.

### **Trump blames previous administrations and the outside world for US decline**

During the 2016 campaign, Trump had claimed that an important explanation for what he called the American decline and despair was that the outside world had taken advantage of the US and that former presidents – mainly Obama – had let it happen. To change this course as president, he said, the US has the *right* to use its power to re-negotiate treaties, re-shape institutions, build new alliances, ensure that US spheres of influence are not declining and changing the world order, putting America first again with whatever means he finds suitable. He does that by provoking both friends and foes abroad, and the Democrats at home. Behind the scenes, many conservatives are cheering the policies they have wanted for years but never been able to pull off (Munson 2018).

At the foreign policy level, liberal interventionists and neo-conservatives in particular, insist that markets around the world must be open to American economic and political interests and thus ensure US prosperity at home – i.e. make the American people realize that their economic growth (the *American dream*) depends on a strong US presence around the world (see, for example, Bacevich 2010; 2005; Hunt 1987; Layne 2006; O’Huallachain/ Sharpe 2005). As mentioned above, throughout history, administrations have repeatedly been convinced that they must, with different strategies, impose certain economic structures or back political leaders in countries where the US has economic interests to make sure those interests and US influence are not challenged. This has involved the so-called “open door

policy practice” which started in the late 1800s as part of US trade policy (demanding that other countries leave their doors open to foreign trade). Later, it was expanded to also include political aspects and the notion of spreading liberal values (Layne 2006).

There have always been those in Washington, of course, who have tried to reject such policies, who have considered both overt *and* covert military operations as actions that should be used very carefully and thus tried to push back on what they have seen as US imperial ambitions. They have warned against an over-stretch or a counterproductive foreign policy. And as mentioned earlier, costly wars such as in Vietnam and Iraq have been followed by periods of restraint and increased confidence in international institutions, such as occurred with Obama after the Bush years. However, Obama only spoke more about restraint than actually changed course (Savage 2015).

The tensions in US foreign policy have been about those disputed principles. But it is accurate to say that the group which favors military solutions and dominance has been far more influential than those who favor restraint and leading by example (Bacevich 2005; Blum 1986; Haley 2006). The hawks have played an important role, especially when people have felt frustrated. And given the fact that the society is profoundly militaristic, such solutions find a ready audience in times of crises.

### **Liberal Interventionists, neoconservatives and their historical impact**

Liberal interventionists and neo-conservatives have openly portrayed the Obama administration in unfavorable light regarding its (in)action in various international conflicts. During the whole Obama presidency, these groups often criticized what they saw as Obama’s inability to keep the country’s global supremacy. They insisted that he had allowed the US to lose its initiative and strength (e.g., Frum 2009; Pletka 2009 and Wolfowitz 2009) and produced reports on the ways to retain or retrieve the US leading role (Blumenthal/Friedberg 2009). This line of attack intensified throughout his presidency, which mirrors what occurred in previous periods. Their testimonies were also used by right wing radio hosts to fuel the base with fear about the future regarding US global strength. This would ensure their listeners didn’t hate Obama *just* for Obamacare or his liberal positions, but also to let them know he threatened American interests abroad and thus endangered American prosperity (Pelosi 2018).

It is crucial to understand that liberal interventionists and neo-conservatives, i.e. the hawks in Washington, are exceedingly influential, with enormous economic and political resources (Plischke 1997). Even more important, they have great capacity to mobilize every time they believe the US is moving in a “soft” direction, which I’ve studied more closely in my previous research (Stranne 2014). For example, the Project for a New American Century (PNAC) is a group that was funded in 1997 because its founders were frustrated that George H. W. Bush did not remove Saddam Hussein from power in 1991. PNAC includes neo-conservatives along with some liberal interventionists and its impact on the Bush administration has been confirmed by many (Cirincione 2005; Buchanan 2005, 2005; Ryn 2005; Raimondo 2005; Wallerstein 2005). Thus, after 9/11, they moved quickly to present a roadmap for George W. Bush and the war on terror which led to the invasion of Iraq 2003. A fact that two of the architects confirmed to me in a 2010 interview (Donnelly & Schmitt 2010). PNAC, in many ways, used the same kind of mobilizing structures as those designed in the late 1970s, when influential groups reacted strongly to what they called a softening to the Communist threat following the Vietnam war (Stranne 2011). Although it was Nixon (and his national security advisor Henry Kissinger) who launched the detente policy and SALT I agreement, some neo-conservative intellectuals and CIA officials got Ronald Reagan and later, George H. W. Bush, to follow an even more aggressive, non-negotiable approach towards what they considered were threats to the American image which had developed due to the actions of those who wanted to go *soft* on the communist threat (Halper/Clarke 2004; Hessing-Cahn 1998; Gerson 1997). They hoped to get a “soberer” analysis of the issues at stake (Podhoretz 1979). As a result, some governments, such as Panama, took a more independent line towards Washington, which the hawks said needed to be reversed. They also supported the Contras in Nicaragua to make sure that country did not openly become anti-American. This, in part, was a replay of what occurred immediately after WWII, with policies pushed, first from a report in 1946 signed by Edward Willett (Willett 1946), George Kennan’s work in 1947, and later from a report by a group led by Paul Nitze, who didn’t want to negotiate any peace agreements with the Soviets; instead, the group wanted to quickly mobilize for a more confrontational approach towards the Kremlin (Hammond 1962: II the origins of NSC-68).

When the Cold War ended and America stood alone as the world’s superpower, the country could have declared victory and brought some of its troops home. Instead, it sought to secure even greater supremacy and to

dominate the Middle East—a vision outlined by Paul Wolfowitz in the early 1990s (Wertheim 2019).

However, neither liberal interventionists, nor neo-conservatives are coherent groups and are diverse in many ways. Still, in previous research, I found that those within these groups who promote an interventionist approach in the world, interpret critical moments in a somewhat consistent way. Perhaps even more important, they are very effective in converging each time they think US supremacy is challenged. Also, many within these groups repeatedly hold prominent positions when conflicts escalate. For example, Donald Rumsfeld, Dick Cheney and Paul Wolfowitz did not suddenly arrive on the scene with Bush Junior. Rather, they'd held critical positions from the 1970s and played important roles then, during the 1990s, and onwards (Sniegowski 2008).

Among the most vocal critics during Obama's presidency were John Bolton (former US Ambassador to the UN under Bush II) and Mike Pompeo, both neo-conservatives. They repeatedly accused Obama for his unwillingness to show both allies and foes that America is a power that has the *obligation* to lead the world and use whatever means necessary to preserve this position. Such policies also translate into re-writing treaties and alliances. Although Bolton is out, Pompeo is still Secretary of State and he is a person with a reputation of avoiding diplomacy as well as repeatedly threatening dire consequences for US "enemies." He has supported Trump to withdraw from agreements with Russia and Iran but also to increase troops in Afghanistan and the number of drone strikes.

For the hawks, every form of compromise, such as the Iran deal, is unacceptable and not a sign of strength or insight into complex international relations. Rather, they see it as submitting to their enemies' claims and putting the U.S. in harm's way. It doesn't matter that Obama did much of what Bush II had done regarding for example mass surveillance, heightened drone war and US involvement in the military intervention in Libya, all carefully described by Charlie Savage in his 2015 book, "Power Wars." For the Washington hawks, it is not only about military actions but rather they simply can't accept a leader who questions American exceptionalism or mission, as Obama did in early 2009, even apologizing for America's behavior. They insist it should not withdraw from any part of the world where it can dominate, such as in the Middle East, a region that Obama had likely concluded the U.S. should not dominate, since that ambition had become counterproductive.

These groups pushed for a new approach after 2016. Many preferred Hillary Clinton to Donald Trump, because they felt she would have followed a more hawkish policy than Obama, and many didn't trust Trump for good reasons. But as soon as Trump won, they were able to convince his administration how their strategies could be coupled with his vision. Thus, both Bolton and Pompeo got positions in the center of the administration, *along with many other hawks*. Regardless of what they think about Trump's behavior, they can use their positions to promote their world view and re-write their policies to adjust to Trump's rhetoric or try to achieve their aims as they see as appropriate - that is, to retain US global supremacy in a way that fits with new global structures. However, with an unpredictable, problematic person in the White House, it is uncertain where this will end. It was much easier to see the Iraq War coming in 2002, when Bush adopted neo-conservative thinking into his rhetoric and practice (Schmitt 2010). But although many things may appear contradictory in the present administration, the America First policy dominates, which is partly based on the hawks' vision of U.S. uncompromising dominance combined with Trump's business-orientated tactics and vision (*tactic* is a more adequate concept to use than strategy when it refers to the president's thinking).

Putting the administration's actions in the larger pattern makes it appear as if it once again is re-formulating the idea about the U.S. role and making U.S. supremacy fit into new global circumstances. Expanding US spheres of influence as the opportunity arose. Once again, aggressively and unconditionally from an American perspective, framed in the National Security Strategy. As part of the progressive continuity in US foreign policy history.

### **Trump's National Security Strategy 2017 – putting America First – *again***

When analyzing the Trump administration's National Security Strategy, it is clear that it differs in some respects say, from the one that Bush II presented in 2002, which stressed the importance of alliances and international structures to defeat different threats. Bush's NSS also stated that the international community has the best chance to preserve peace (NSS 2002). However, it also stated that the U.S. had a moment of opportunity to extend the benefits of a free world and that it would stand beside every country that was determined to build a better future by embracing American ideals (Ibid). At the same time, he pointed out in speeches and media interviews

that everyone who wasn't *with* the US was against it and thus a possible target (Ibid). And, despite its commitment to work with allies, soon after 9/11, Bush and the neo-conservatives in his administration rejected the idea of diplomacy, full stop. Thus, they sent troops into Afghanistan and later, Iraq. Moreover, they acted preemptively and later rejected the Geneva Convention and invented the concept of "illegal combatants" for whom regular war laws would not apply (Cheney 2002). In that aspect, not much differs from Trump's approach towards the rest of the world or even US allies. In fact, just as the Bush administration left few options on the table in its war on terror, Trump has closed most options in the trade wars he's launched.

The same uncompromising attitudes, which represent liberal interventionist or neo-conservative positions—can be found throughout modern history. For example, the Truman Security Strategy was based on the idea that any compromises with the Communists would endanger the US. The perceived Soviet "master-mind-conspiracy" that George Kennan envisioned was seen as an excuse to build a vast military system (Ambrose/Brinkley 1997) – later described by Eisenhower as the military-industrial-complex—which implied that powerful institutions, the defense industry and lobby groups would work together to present a threat and vision for military might that was superior to everyone else's (Haas 2009; Plischke 1997; Turse 2008). Although many considered President Jimmy Carter soft on international threats, his Security Strategy stated that all attempts from any other country to control Middle East oil would be met by U.S. military interventions (Carter January 23 1980). His administration adopted this position due to enormous pressure from influential liberal interventionists and neo-conservative groups that based their views on reports from conservative foreign policy analysts such as Albert Wohlstetter and Paul Nitze.

Thus, we can see that Trump's America First Security Strategy, coupled with the neo-conservatives' goals, is an ambitious plan to reframe the international structure to ensure the U.S. can retain its leading role by adjusting to new global circumstances: that is, it will secure its supremacy and prevent a decline with whatever means necessary.

What we are witnessing is an attempt to prevent a decline and preserve U.S. dominance. In my interpretation of US foreign policy and security strategy, the decline may have begun already in 1991, when the U.S. installed military bases in Saudi Arabia to dominate the Middle East; now that it was a military empire, it also took its first steps to a military overstretch (Layne 2006) and hubris (Walt 2019). The situation worsened with



the invasion of Iraq in 2003, a war which endangered the American economy, exhausted the military and undermined America's position in the eyes of friends and foes. Although President Obama tried to recover from the worst outcomes of the war, the tensions and polarization within American society had profoundly deepened, and many questioned the U.S. position in a more competitive world. Since the hawks will never accept another path other than US domination on the world stage, they have now again captured the moment to reformulate institutions and alliances to ensure America will still rule the future. And their strategies include creating conditions that they think are necessary for this to happen. Whether the strategy will succeed is unknown. While they use different terms and propose different goals than their predecessors, the Trump administration is following a pattern set far earlier, which involved re-writing international relations but always with the aim of keeping "America first."

Thus, a closer look at the administrations actual foreign policy decisions reveal anything but isolation. In fact, to say Trump's strategy to avoid a decline and put America first again is isolationist is utterly misleading. As Andrew Bacevich reminds us in *After Trump* (2018), the President urged Congress to boost the Pentagon budget to \$717 billion, an increase of \$82 billion over the previous year. And, he plans for the U.S. military to remain in more than 150 countries. Even if Trump withdrew some troops, the Armed Forces would still be immense. Moreover, the U.S. remains formally committed to defending the territorial integrity of all NATO members. While Trump sometimes launches an anti-NATO rhetoric, he has even blessed a new member state (Montenegro) and encouraged Macedonia to join. Moreover, his insistence that European nations increase their military budgets and do more for the trans-Atlantic defense was completely in line with the push from President Obama's first Secretary of Defense, Chuck Hagel, who in 2014 warned his European counterparts to step up or watch the alliance become irrelevant (Carpenter 2018). Also, Trump has ensured the security of Israel, Saudi Arabia, and other countries in the Persian Gulf (Bacevich 2018). Furthermore, he has increased troops in Afghanistan by 30 percent, increased the number of drone strikes in Yemen and threatened those he considers enemies with violence. Even with his latest decisions in northern Syria, Trump is not withdrawing, only re-locating troops. Relocation is not departure (Parsi and Wertheim 2019). Moreover, he has authorized the selling weapons to Ukraine and talks about establishing new military bases, for example, in Poland (Carpenter 2018). As Russell Walter

Mead notes, “*Trump’s foreign policy is anything but isolationist, it is ambitious, interventionist and global*” (Mead 2018). And now, it is confronting China, Russia and Iran.

What is certain is that Trump and those around him do not think the way forward should embrace the present global structure. Rather they think the U.S. must challenge international institutions and existing security alliances. It also appears that Trump is ready to use every means at his disposal to implement his vision. But because he thinks so highly of his ability to make people agree with what he wants by carrots and, more importantly, by threats, he doesn’t seem to think he’ll need to use military means. Still, while he has repeatedly criticized costly wars, he has been willing to use military force in Syria and obliterate North Korea; and, according to a report, he considered a covert operation to overthrow the president in Venezuela (Borger 2018). Furthermore, Iran is clearly in his sights, as it has been for hawks, for several decades. Further, *if* Trump decides to use military means in Iran or elsewhere, he has even put nukes on the table.

### **Conclusion**

Based on my previous analyses of US foreign policy, Trump fits very well into a larger pattern of progressive continuity. This means his aggressive America First policy follows previous administrations’ way of adjusting US hegemony or supremacy to new circumstances and expanding its spheres of influence if/when opportunities open. This has followed, as usual, after a period of restraint (the Obama era after the Bush war on terror) where liberal interventionists and neo-conservatives establish a narrative about the US losing its position and heading towards decline. In their interpretation, the country needs a more confrontational stance towards the outside world to keep its supremacy. Trump combines his business-oriented practices with both domestic and foreign policy strategies to adjust *his* interpretation of how the country can keep its position at present, and even take new steps to dominate. In that sense, he follows a long-term pattern. The outcome and likelihood for success is uncertain, but his vision is anything but isolationism.

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