

**In Brief:** Donald Trump's rhetoric to disentangle the United States from what he deems are way-too-costly alliances is rooted in a broader criticism of the United States' post-Cold War "primacy." The established foreign policy doctrine has been sharply questioned by the Republican Party's nominee for president, especially to appeal to the segment of the U.S. electorate which wants the United States to provide security firstly at home. Regardless of the results of the election, Trump's revisionist views are likely to influence future policymaking, and perhaps the international security order as a whole.

## U.S. Domestic Politics and the Future of Primacy

*by Christopher Preble*

Even if Donald J. Trump is not elected President of the United States next week, his emergence as a major political force poses a serious challenge to transatlantic relations.

Trump is a polarizing figure. He is prone to making offensive and insensitive remarks, and frequently seems uninformed. Many Americans doubt that he has the temperament to be president. Meanwhile, conservative activists within the Republican Party doubt his commitment to conservative principles across the board, including on major hot-button issues like abortion rights and health care. Business interests are turned off by his attacks on international trade agreements. For these and other reasons, the likelihood of him actually becoming president is low.

But such odds are nonetheless worrisome for many foreign elites. Trump has openly questioned the value of long-standing U.S. alliances, including the most venerable of these, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Even a small chance that the United States will not come to the defense of its NATO allies in their hour of need cannot be comforting for those who have been told for decades that it would.

A very different political figure, one more reliably conservative or liberal, better prepared for governing,

and less prone to outrageous statements about women, or minority religious and ethnic groups, could adopt many of Trump's policy stances, and have a better chance of winning.

The mere possibility that America's obligation within the NATO alliance might be open to interpretation should therefore serve as a powerful incentive for European countries to hedge their bets and get serious about developing a credible defense capability, one that is capable of acting without the United States in the lead.

A truly liberal system includes self-determination. Yet, the vast majority of people that fall under the dominion of the United States will have no role in selecting its next leader.

Regardless of whether that occurs, it was probably unwise for Europeans to have relied so much on a U.S. political system over which they had no control. The fact that a bipartisan consensus among U.S. foreign policy elites sustained the transatlantic bargain for decades didn't mean that that consensus was permanent.

Conversely, they can be forgiven for believing that it might have lasted a while longer. After all, it has survived challenges in the past. And it still might. Hillary Clinton, whose talk of America's exceptional role in global security echoes the conventional wisdom among policy elites, has a strong chance of winning the presidency.

### The Primacist Consensus in American Politics

What is the foreign policy consensus among American elites? To the extent that it can be summarized in a single word, that word is "primacy": a foreign policy that hinges on a forward-deployed military geared to stopping prospective threats before they materialize. Primacy holds that it would be too dangerous to allow other countries to defend themselves and their interests. Some will botch the job, necessitating costly U.S. intervention later. Others will succeed too well, unleashing arms races that would alter the delicate balance of regional or international relations. Thus, primacy reassures, and it discourages other countries from defending themselves and their interests.

For much of the past two decades, these underlying premises of U.S. foreign policy have not changed, although the preferred terms or phrases to describe them have. Other popular variations include "deep engagement," "unipolarity," "liberal hegemony," or the particularly grandiose "benevolent global hegemony."

President Obama favors "leadership." That word appears 35 times in his latest National Security Strategy<sup>1</sup>. His predecessors have all had similar aspirations, although most managed to work in a few more synonyms. But it all boils down to primacy.

For example, at the dawn of the post-Cold War era, officials in the George H.W. Bush administration aspired for the United States to be the sole global power. Now that the nation's long-time rival was gone, the object of U.S. foreign policy, according to an early draft of the Defense Planning Guidance, was to "prevent the re-emergence of a new rival" capable of challenging U.S. power in any vital area, including Western Europe, Asia, or the territory of the former Soviet Union. To accomplish this task, the United States would retain preponderant military power, not

<sup>1</sup> National Security Strategy, The White House, February 2015. [https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2015\\_national\\_security\\_strategy.pdf](https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2015_national_security_strategy.pdf)

merely to deter attacks against the United States, but also to deter “potential competitors” — including long-time U.S. allies such as Germany and Japan — “from even aspiring to a larger regional or global role.”

The defenders of this arrangement, whereby the U.S. government provides security for the world while the governments of all other countries focus mostly on domestic needs, contend that the inherent liberalism of the United States explains the durability of its hegemony. Unlike illiberal empires of the past, the United States, as a liberal country domestically, serves as a liberal hegemon globally. That explains why it hasn’t given rise to the types of balancing coalitions seen in the past. The vast majority of countries benefit from U.S. hegemony, the argument goes, and few have anything to fear from it when it does exercise its power.

But a truly liberal system includes the essential element of self-determination; individuals must have a say in who governs them and how they are governed. Yet, the vast majority of people that fall under the dominion of the United States will have no role in selecting its next leader. They can’t vote in U.S. elections. And the awkward realization that they have entrusted their security to another government, liberal though it may be, over which they have no control, is crashing down hard on them.

### **Anxious Allies**

How else to explain why foreign leaders have been so outspoken in their denunciations of Donald Trump? Public officials traditionally avoid weighing in on such matters. Few wish to be seen as meddling in another country’s political affairs. Within the past year, however, quite a number of senior officials have loudly criticized Trump. Indeed, if the presidential contest in the United States was to be decided by expressions of ill-will by non-Americans, Trump would be on his way to a landslide victory.

A few examples:

- Then-British Prime Minister David Cameron said late last year that Trump’s remarks surrounding a Muslim travel ban were “divisive, stupid and wrong.”
- Before he became Britain’s foreign minister, Boris Johnson dismissed Trump’s claim that parts of London were no-go zones for the police as “complete and utter nonsense.” The former Mayor of London noted “crime has been falling steadily in both London and New York — and the only reason I wouldn’t go to some parts of New York,” Johnson continued, “is the real risk of meeting Donald Trump.”
- French President Francois Hollande declared that Trump “makes you want to retch.”

Other words uttered by foreign leaders to describe Trump’s remarks include: “ignorant,” “dumb,” “barking mad,” “irrational,” and “scary.” Trump, the person, has been variously described as “an idiot,” “a buffoon,” an “ignorant racist,” and “a wazzock.”

Trump probably cherishes such scorn. His campaign, built around a naked appeal to “America First” and an open disregard for the opinions of others, especially those of elites and non-Americans, has clearly benefitted from a sense among many of his supporters that typical American politicians, both Republicans and Democrats, pay too much attention to what others around the world think.

The international disquiet that Trump has caused, however, suggests a major flaw at the heart of U.S. foreign policy and the international order that it has created. It has reminded us all that U.S. elections could have a direct impact on not merely the 320+ million people in the United States, but arguably the 7+ billion people of the world.

In many respects, the U.S. government has taken on a task typically entrusted to other governments —

namely, providing security for their people. It is not hyperbole, therefore, when President Hollande says “an American election is a world election.” Former Spanish foreign minister, Ana Palacio, echoed these sentiments: “The opportunism, unreliability and amorality that we have seen during the [Trump] campaign would be damaging for the world in general and hurt Europe in particular<sup>2</sup>.” In other words, there is a reasonably widespread assumption that the government that Americans choose to govern America also governs, loosely, the rest of the world.

But that was never the intention. And so, to the extent that the United States attempts to govern the world, it does a poor job.

The U.S. government exists first and foremost to provide security for the people of the United States. Americans elect the person that they believe will keep their country safe and prosperous. If doing so also benefits the rest of the world — and it often does — that is a pleasant by-product. Very few Americans, however, would confuse providing security for others as the core object of U.S. foreign policy.

Too many American elites, however, have taken the U.S. Constitution’s pledge to “provide for the common defense” as a mandate that extends even to those men and women who are not party to that iconic document’s unique social contract. And U.S. policymakers’ repeated assurances to the leaders of other countries that Washington will treat their security concerns as synonymous with America’s own have led many to neglect their defenses. Indeed, as noted above, that was the object of U.S. foreign policy.

Thus, U.S. foreign policy is characterized by a dramatic disconnect between what Americans expect of it and what the nation’s leaders are giving them. And Donald Trump has ruthlessly exploited that gap.

<sup>2</sup> 61 Not-very-positive Things Foreign Leaders Have Said about Donald Trump.” Washington Post. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/05/06/47-not-very-positive-things-foreign-leaders-have-said-about-donald-trump/>

In the past, the vast majority of U.S. policymakers, of all political persuasions, were inclined to ignore the elite versus public divide. If Trump loses in November, they are even more likely to do so. Americans have never been strongly supportive of primacy, but the issue has rarely had political salience. Elections are not won or lost on a candidate’s commitment to preserving primacy, although Americans are sensitive to the perception of relative decline, strategic weakness, or increased vulnerability to threats. This may explain the appeal of Trump’s signature slogan to “Make America Great Again.”

But while U.S. domestic politics may temporarily still favor the grand strategic status quo, the longer term economic and strategic context does not. The costs of primacy are rising; and the benefits are intangible, at best.

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Even one of the strongest advocates of primacy conceded more than a decade ago that it might not be realistic to expect Americans to bear the burdens of global governance indefinitely.

“Americans,” Michael Mandelbaum grudgingly admitted in his book, *The Case for Goliath*, “approach the world much as other people do.... For the American public, foreign policy, like charity, begins

at home.” For that reason, above all others, Mandelbaum predicted, “the American role in the world may depend in part on Americans not scrutinizing it too closely.”

In retrospect, it was unwise to base U.S. foreign policy — and, by extension, the security of most of the planet — on the assumption that Americans would forever bear the costs without questioning the need to do so. Further, it was unwise to believe that historically strong nations such as China and Russia would let such an arrangement go unchallenged. Looking ahead, it would be particularly foolish to base a global security strategy on these now-disproved suppositions.

### **Trump’s Incoherent Opportunism, and the Opportunity for Positive Change**

For now, the Washington foreign policy consensus survives. Barely. Trump’s frontal assault on that consensus has prompted a predictable backlash from the elites who crafted it. The real estate mogul is all too happy to fire right back, but, as with so much of his campaign, there is little substance to his attacks.

Indeed, Trump ultimately endorsed the view that U.S. foreign policy, and thus the roles and missions assigned to the U.S. military, will remain unchanged. Although he had previously questioned the Pentagon’s spending practices, and hinted at making U.S. allies pay more for the security services they receive from the U.S. military, Trump now calls for dramatic increases for the Pentagon’s budget. A speech on September 7, 2016, drew praise even from some avowed #NeverTrumpers who were encouraged that the unconventional GOP nominee had adopted conventional approaches to growing the U.S. military.

In one sense, this call for more military spending is the logical response. It is unreasonable to expect the U.S. military to do the same, or more, with less. It is unfair to the troops and their families. Both Donald Trump

and Hillary Clinton have railed against the spending caps imposed by the bipartisan Budget Control Act of 2011. Most in Washington, DC, believe that the only way to address the means/end mismatch is to remove the fiscal constraints.

But the U.S. military’s roles and missions are a function of the nation’s grand strategy, and that strategy must take account of the resources that can be made available to execute it. In the current domestic political context, increasing the means entails telling the American people to accept cuts in popular domestic programs, higher taxes, more government debt, or all three of these things, so that U.S. allies and security partners don’t feel the need to boost their defenses.

It seems unlikely that Americans will embrace such an approach forever. “Defending our allies’ security” ranked near the bottom of Americans’ foreign policy priorities — tied with “Limiting Climate Change” — in the Chicago Council on Global Affairs’ most recent report on American public opinion. Future U.S. leaders may eventually align the object of U.S. foreign policy with the American people’s wishes.

In the meantime, Trump’s emergence provides an opportunity for leaders of all countries to reconsider how much trust they wish to place in the United States as the guarantor of global security. Some, perhaps many, will hedge their bets, and revisit their decision to sub-contract governance to an unpredictable partner — one that, their wishes notwithstanding, they do not control.

The flaws inherent in primacy were apparent for some time. Without intending to do so, or even realizing that he’d done so, the mercurial Mr. Trump may be responsible for a welcome change in global security policy. If the reaction against him creates a more resilient international order, one that is less dependent on the military power of a single country, that would be a silver lining to Trump’s otherwise dark cloud.

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### **About the Author**

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