

The Foreign Policy Foundations of Trumpism

Las bases de la política exterior del trumpismo

JOSEPH M. HUMIRE*

ABSTRACT

The election of President Donald J. Trump in 2016 introduced a new foreign policy, one that holds certain aspects of traditional schools of thought in international relations but is unique in that it does not prescribe to any one theory or academic framework. It does, however, contain foundational pillars that are essential to understand the cause and effect of President Trump's foreign policy. Through careful review of President Trump's prepared foreign policy speeches and interviews with Trump administration officials, this article argues that a return to nation-state sovereignty and burden sharing are the most important pillars of President Trump's foreign policy, known as America First or "Trumpism."

Key words: America First, Trumpism, de-globalization, sovereignty, great power competition.

RESUMEN

La elección del presidente Donald J. Trump en 2016 introdujo una nueva política exterior que mantiene ciertos aspectos de las escuelas tradicionales de pensamiento en relaciones internacionales, pero es única en el sentido de que no se adhiere a ninguna teoría o marco académico en particular. Sin embargo, contiene pilares fundamentales esenciales para comprender la causa y el efecto de la política exterior del presidente Trump. A través de una revisión cuidadosa de los discursos sobre política exterior del presidente Trump y entrevistas con funcionarios de su administración, este artículo argumenta que el retorno a la soberanía del estado-nación y la asignación de responsabilidades son los pilares más importantes de la política exterior del presidente Trump, conocida como "Estados Unidos primero" o "trumpismo".

Palabras clave: Estados Unidos primero, trumpismo, desglobalización, soberanía, competencia entre grandes potencias.

* Center for a Secure Free Society; visiting fellow at Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for National Security and Foreign Policy; visiting professor at Adam Smith Center for Economic Freedom, Florida International University; jmhumire@securefreesociety.org.

INTRODUCTION

There is arguably no greater political phenomenon in the United States than the 2016 election of President Donald J. Trump. For the first time in U.S. history, the American electorate put their trust in someone that did not come from the political establishment or the military elites. The lasting impact of the Trump presidency has left scholars and academics with an abundance of material to study and determine the foundations of a new foreign policy in the 21st century, known as America First or “Trumpism” (CFR, 2023).

Speculation and controversy were abundant throughout President Trump’s four-year term in office. This led to most commentary about his foreign policy to focus on the palace intrigue of the White House, or on the president’s incendiary social media postings, namely from his re-instated Twitter account (now called “X”). President Trump’s rhetoric or more specifically, his social media, isn’t as important for assessing his foreign policy as is reading his formal speeches, analyzing the America First policies, and interviewing several key officials who served in his administration to develop and implement the foundational pillars of “Trumpism.”

This article reviews more than twenty of President Trump’s prepared foreign policy speeches to include all four official statements to the United Nations General Assembly, and some speeches that candidate Donald Trump gave during his 2016 campaign that set the tone for his foreign policy. Moreover, the article draws on interviews with at least a half dozen former Trump administration officials in the White House, State Department, Defense Department, National Security Council, and the U.S. Agency for International Development, as well as interviews with a few foreign ambassadors from Latin America assigned to Washington D.C. during the years of President Trump’s term in office.

To understand the foreign policy pillars of Trumpism, the first sections provide context on Donald Trump’s ascension to the White House and the geopolitical landscape the world was in before he was elected in 2016. The sections that follow will outline the two foundational pillars of President Trump’s America First foreign policy, providing examples as to how each pillar was applied during his time in office from 2017 until January 2021. Finally, the conclusion will provide an interpretation of how the foundations of Trumpism fit into the foreign policy framework of America’s founding fathers.

A BOTTOM-UP APPROACH

The difficulty of understanding President Trump's foreign policy is that it doesn't adhere to traditional schools of thought in international relations (IR) theory. Constructivists may agree with President Trump's decision to withdraw U.S. military presence from Afghanistan (Cowden, 2017), but realists might condemn that policy while celebrating the president's withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) more commonly known as the "Iran nuclear deal." Neoliberals largely praised President Trump's domestic economic policies, such as tax cuts and deregulation, but chastised the president for his international trade policy, which included tariffs and trade wars (Kotsko, 2022).

President Trump's foreign policy did not fit neatly into the constrained boxes of academic IR theory and was not properly understood by many in academia or think tanks (Hass, 2021). Part of the reason is that President Trump was not thinking in theoretical abstracts, he was governing based on instincts and experience developed over decades in international business and growing up next to working-class Americans on the streets of New York City (Humire, 2023a).

Prior to the 2016 election, most of the American public knew of Donald Trump from his stints on television such as the popular show *The Apprentice* or from his real estate dealings and the Trump Tower in midtown Manhattan. Donald Trump did not grow up in Manhattan. He spent the formative years of his life in Queens, a popular borough of immigrant neighborhoods made up largely of working-class citizens of the United States. Considered the most linguistically diverse place on earth with 47 percent of its residents foreign-born (Naeisha, 2018), Donald Trump gained his foreign policy instincts in Queens according to the former Deputy Assistant and Strategist to the President, Dr. Sebastian Gorka, who spent time with President Trump both in and out of the White House.

Another U.S. president that is often credited with leading his foreign policy through instincts is Ronald Reagan. The well-known Roman phrase of "peace through strength" first used in the American context by George Washington became doctrine during the Reagan administration and was highlighted in 1986 during President Reagan's famous foreign policy and national security speech at the height of the Cold War (1986). In his speech, to describe the essence of the peace through strength doctrine, Reagan referenced the boxing heavyweight champion of his day, "I've never seen anyone insult Jack Dempsey" (1986), implying that if you project strength and are prepared for war you can prolong peace.

This layman's approach to explaining complex foreign policy comes from President Reagan's upbringing in middle America and—like Donald Trump—he is

remembered as an “instinctual leader” by those that spent significant time with him (Morris, 2004).

These instincts allowed President Trump to break with the foreign policy status quo during his first year in office. Reflected in the first National Security Strategy (NSS) of the Trump administration published in December 2017 (Trump, 2017a), since 1987 several U.S. presidents use the NSS to communicate their administration’s foreign policy and national security vision to the U.S. Congress. The 2017 NSS marked an important change from the strategy of previous American presidents by putting “strategic competition” with Russia and China front and center in U.S. foreign policy and national security.

The administration of President George W. Bush led the way in completing the accession of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) to the World Trade Organization in 2001. In 2009, President Barack Obama sought to “reset relations” with Russia (White House, 2010) and reverse what he called a “dangerous drift” in this important bilateral relationship (Li, 2016). Both American presidents, a Republican and Democrat, sought to engage Russia and China to bring them closer to America’s vision of trade and democracy. This strategy largely failed. President Trump reversed course and sought a new strategy of “strategic competition” with China and Russia reflected in the opening pages of the 2017 NSS:

China and Russia challenge American power, influence, and interests, attempting to erode American security and prosperity. ... These competitions require the United States to rethink the policies of the past two decades—policies based on the assumption that engagement with rivals and their inclusion in international institutions and global commerce would turn them into benign actors and trustworthy partners. For the most part, this premise turned out to be false. (Trump, 2017a: 2-3)

Some have called President Trump’s foreign policy posture “conservative realism” (Schadlow, 2018). Others have called it “transactional” or “unpredictable” (Bentley and Máxine, 2021), but it stands to reason that his approach is unconventional and strays outside the norms of conventional wisdom in Washington D.C. President Trump’s pragmatic approach to U.S. foreign policy can be viewed as an extension of his common sense approach to business, a trait he acquired outside of the political arena and by spending time listening to the concerns of American citizens. It is through this experience that President Trump saw a darker side to globalization, one that is not fully covered by trade or investment statistics, but rather viewed through the lens of a factory worker who is unemployed—or a border town that is being overrun by unprecedented crime and violence.

THE “END OF GLOBALIZATION”

By the time Donald Trump became a candidate in the 2016 election, a fundamental transformation of the global economy was underway. Few politicians picked up on this, but within the business community the talk of the “end of globalization” was an undercurrent prompting company executives and investors to rethink their supply chains. The three-decade era of globalization was starting to reverse course, and many businessmen were discussing the future of their industries in a world with increased trade competition and a worsening economic outlook in several countries, namely China.

Today, the talk of the end of globalization is more commonplace especially after the Ukraine war and COVID-19 pandemic that disrupted global supply chains. “Tension between the U.S. and China was accelerated by the pandemic and now this invasion of Ukraine by Russia—all these trends are raising serious concerns about a decoupling world,” José Manuel Barroso, chair of Goldman Sachs International and a former president of the European Commission, told *The Financial Times* in an interview last year (Wiggins et al., 2022).

The discussion about de-globalization, however, began more than a decade earlier after the 2009 financial crisis. By 2010, American businessmen were already contemplating how to avoid significant shocks to the global economy and started viewing trade with China as an unequal playing field (Wiggins et al., 2022). President Trump’s “instincts” on China could have come from his business experience given that several American businessmen complained that competing with China was “unfair” given its use of subsidies as well as restrictions imposed on companies seeking access to its market. In fact, the business community was ahead of the curve of Western governments who only recently started seeing China’s trade competition as detrimental to working-class citizens and a vulnerability to national security.

Since the 1999 Seattle protests, there have been several backlashes against globalization, but it was the 2009 financial crisis that began a political awareness in the United States about the second and third order effects of globalization. These concerns were not tied to any political party and came from both the right and left side of the political spectrum in America. For instance, the “Occupy Wall Street” phenomena in 2011 was a leftist populist movement railing against big banks and corporate greed.

Meanwhile, two years earlier, a right-leaning populist movement, known as the Tea Party began to emerge calling for lower taxes and reduced public spending. While each political phenomena had different grievances, they both drove popular sentiment toward an anti-globalization movement that is relevant today.

Empirical data shows that there may be a reason that these popular perceptions are gaining traction. There is substantial economic research documenting the changes in global trade that impacted communities exposed to import competition from low-wage countries (Gilbert et al., 2023). The main data point, however, that depicts the potential for de-globalization is that, since 2009, imports as a percentage of GDP are reducing, and international trade is growing slower than global GDP, according to the World Bank (Constantinescu et al., 2016). This is a recent phenomenon that is in stark contrast to the trend of the previous twenty years, the era of hyper-globalization from 1989 to 2009 (Shekar et al., 2023). Essentially, from the end of the Cold War to the global financial crisis, international trade grew almost twice as fast as global GDP. This is no longer the case.

This de-globalization trend seems to be intensifying after the Ukraine War, which has sparked a crisis of food insecurity throughout the world, especially in Africa and Latin America. Given that Ukraine and Russia combined produce approximately 12 percent of the calories consumed in the developing world, the disruption of the supply chains of wheat and fertilizer from these two countries has had a negative impact on food prices (Glauber and Laborde, 2022).

According to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the price of the basket of basic foods rose to its highest levels this century after Russia's invasion of Ukraine (FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO, 2023). In April 2022—the month after the invasion—the food price index hit a record high of 160. By comparison, seven years earlier, in 2016 the index was at 91 and ten years before that, in 2006, it was at 72. In effect, the price of food has almost doubled in the last two decades, making food insecurity one of the primary issues that is driving political instability and by extension distrust in globalization.

Today, terms like near-shoring, friend-shoring, and regionalization are common in the foreign policy community, but before 2016 they were fringe topics spoken mostly by Wall Street investors and hedge fund managers. Even though the era of hyper-globalization was receding, most of the U.S. policy community hadn't noticed until Donald Trump raised the issue during the 2016 campaign and subsequently as policy during his first years in office. By 2018, the U.S. was in full-on trade war with China using elements of economic statecraft, such as tariffs and trade barriers, to attack what the Trump administration called "unfair trade practices" from China, which includes intellectual property theft that costs an approximate \$300 billion to the U.S. taxpayer, according to the former White House Counsel Jim Schultz (Smith, 2018).

Much of the world has woken up to the realpolitik of international trade, but it took time for mainstream politicians and economists to acknowledge the negative effects of globalization. Today, Western governments are increasingly concerned that

competition with China is “unfair” and are scrutinizing the potential dual use military applications of many of its commercial projects, namely in the developing world. President Trump and his policies certainly helped spur this new perspective, but his ascension to the presidency is as much a reaction to the perception of de-globalization as it is a result of the United States position in an ever-changing world.

This context is important to understand Trumpism as a reaction more than a catalyst in global affairs, much like Britain’s 2016 Brexit referendum vote that resulted in a decision to leave the European Union. Once Donald Trump became president, this reaction turned into new policies. His instincts formed new pillars of U.S. foreign policy during his presidency that began with the premise that President Trump sees the world as it is, not as we might wish it to be. The reality is that the rules-based international order has, through misguided policies and lack of focus, enabled the rise of autocratic world powers exploiting that order to their advantage. The pillars of Trumpism are designed to face that reality, as described in the first page of the 2017 National Security Strategy: “We are enforcing our borders, building trade relationships based on fairness and reciprocity, and defending America’s sovereignty without apology.”

PILLAR ONE: A RETURN TO NATION-STATE SOVEREIGNTY

President Trump mentioned the word “sovereignty” no fewer than 21 times in his inaugural address to the United Nations (UN) General Assembly in September 2017 (*Politico*, 2017). In doing so, he sent a strong message to the world’s largest multinational body by appealing to the original UN charter, reminding them that the UN was founded on the nation-state principal (UN, 2023).

In 1943, at the Quebec Conference, U.S. Secretary of State Cordell Hull and British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden drafted a declaration that called for “a general international organization, based on the principle sovereign equality of all nations,” which formed the basis for the UN charter established at the San Francisco Conference in 1945 (USDOS, 2009). The UN Charter intended to balance universal ideals with state sovereignty, but throughout the years several American presidents used the bully pulpit to appeal to the former and forgot about the latter.

President Harry Truman, who presided over America’s participation in the first UN General Assembly in 1946 understood the natural tension between state sovereignty and universal ideals, stating: “it is easier to get people to agree upon peace as an ideal than to ... agree to subject their own acts to the collective judgement of mankind (Truman, 2023).” In the decades that followed, several U.S. presidents chose to

appeal to universal values. President Jimmy Carter focused on “fundamental human rights,” President George H.W. Bush called 1989 “freedom’s moment,” and President Bill Clinton stated the intention to “build a world where democracy knows no borders.”

The only U.S. president in recent memory that appealed to the sovereignty principal in the UN charter was President Richard Nixon who, in 1969, promoted the “integrity of borders” and a nation’s “right to determine their own destiny without outside interference” (Chhabra, 2017). President Trump’s first UN General Assembly speech was very Nixonian in that sense, introducing the first pillar of Trumpism, the return to the relevance of the nation-state, into international affairs.

In foreign affairs, we are renewing this founding principle of sovereignty. Our government’s first duty is to its people, to our citizens—to serve their needs, to ensure their safety, to preserve their rights, and to defend their values. 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. All responsible leaders have an obligation to serve their own citizens, and the nation-state remains the best vehicle for elevating the human condition. (*Politico*, 2017)

Trumpism has a first principle that sovereignty is a priori to prosperity, human rights, civil rights, and democracy (Ford, 1998). The concept of nation-state sovereignty was a guiding principle throughout President Trump’s four years in office, helping shape some of the president’s most important decisions from immigration, national security, the economy, and America’s alliances (Patrick, 2017). No policy, however, reflects the first principle of nation-state sovereignty more than President Trump’s border security policy, reflected in what is commonly known as “The Wall.”

A hallmark promise of Trump’s campaign was to build a wall on the U.S.–Mexico border that drew criticism and condemnation from both sides of the border (Cresci, 2017). The general reaction was negative because The Wall was understood to be divisive and xenophobic in nature. Some compared it to the Berlin Wall, that exemplified communist Soviet Union’s divide of East and West Germany during the Cold War (Krushcheva, 2019). This criticism largely missed the point.

The idea of a border wall was not about dividing a sovereign country. It was about enforcing the sovereignty of one nation from its neighbor. It was about protecting the physical and territorial integrity of the United States and Mexico, and by extension safeguarding the democracy of both nation-states.

If we examine the evolution of representative democracy from ancient Greece to its maximum expression after World War II, the inflection point where democracies

begin to flourish is after the 1648 Peace of Westphalia that, for the first time in modern history, enabled the sovereign will of the people to be reflected in the sovereign nation-state (Farr, 2005). During the Middle Ages, democracy was an inferior form of governance to monarchy—leading to several wars and conflicts that almost collapsed Western Civilization in the 16th and 17th century. The Thirty Years' War from 1618 to 1648, one of the longest and bloodiest conflicts in European history, led to two peace treaties signed in October 1648 in the Westphalian cities of Osnabrück and Münster. The keys to the treaties were provisions confirming the autonomy of states within the Holy Roman Empire, laying the foundation of the modern nation-state.

Scholars today dispute whether Westphalian sovereignty led to representative democracy in its modern form (Inoguchi and Bacon, 2001); however, it is undeniable that Westphalia changed the relationship between rulers and the subjects they ruled. After Westphalia, the individual citizen became the centerpiece of state and civil society relations (Falk, 2007). Trumpism is aimed at returning to this concept and elevating sovereignty as a first principle for foreign relations. In this context, The Wall was not a divisive measure to separate individual citizens of a nation-state, which was the case of the Berlin Wall. Instead, it was to enforce respect for the rule of law between two modern neighboring nation-states that are autonomous and sovereign in their governance structures.

In the first year of Trump's presidency, he decided to amplify the sovereignty message in a place that historically had its borders erased and has fought with blood and treasure to keep its national identity, sovereignty, and territory intact. This place is Poland. The Warsaw speech on July 6, 2017, at Krasinski Square, best reflects President Trump's expression of national sovereignty as a first principle (Trump, 2017b). Here the president recapped the Polish people's century-long struggle to regain and defend its sovereign territory and emphasized Poland's proven commitment to the defense of democracy, freedom, and sovereignty. Marrying the concept of individual liberty to national sovereignty is an attempt to keep with the universal values described in the UN charter, and a precedent that President Trump first formally expressed in the Warsaw speech.

Americans, Poles, and the nations of Europe value individual freedom and sovereignty. We must work together to confront forces, whether they come from inside or out, from the South or the East, that threaten over time to undermine these values and to erase the bonds of culture, faith and tradition that make us who we are. If left unchecked, these forces will undermine our courage, sap our spirit, and weaken our will to defend ourselves and our societies. (Trump, 2017b)

One year after President Trump left office, Poland was subject once again to the aggression from autocratic neighbors. In July 2021, Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko threatened to “flood” the European Union with “drugs” and “migrants” and later that year a wave of mass migration from mostly the Middle East rushed into Poland en route to other European countries (Evans, 2021). Within three months, an estimated 32,000 migrants from the Middle East and Africa traversed through Belarus into Poland, who accused Belarus of organizing “hybrid warfare” against the sovereignty of its country. Poland’s Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki went further and directly accused Vladimir Putin of being behind the border crisis, then declared a state of national emergency and approved an estimated 1.6 billion zloty (approximately US\$ 407 million) to build a border wall with Belarus (AFP-Euronews, 2021). The neighboring Baltic countries of Lithuania and Latvia did the same, and twelve EU governments stated their support for building physical barriers along the borders with Belarus. Poland completed its 186 km border barrier and Lithuania completed the 502 km barrier in mid-2022 (Gera and Grieshaber, 2022).

Today, the sovereignty of Europe as a continent is being challenged like never before in the 21st century. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the mass migration from the Middle East and Africa, and the rising sovereign debt crisis are all serious problems that are prompting a rising demand by the citizens of several European countries to enforce sovereignty. Italy’s 2022 election of nationalist Giorgia Meloni as prime minister is an example of the rising popular sentiments supporting sovereignty in Europe. Sentiments that are challenging the supra-national structure of the European Union.

The first pillar of Trumpism is meant to address this and find effective solutions to these real-world problems. It’s implementation; however, requires a second pillar that is less philosophical and more practical. A foundational premise that allies make each other stronger when there is equal burden sharing among the members of such alliance.

As long as we know our history, we will know how to build our future. Americans know that a strong alliance of free, sovereign, and independent nations is the best defense for our freedoms and for our interests. That is why my administration has demanded that all members of NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] finally meet their full and fair financial obligation. (Trump, 2017b)

Pillar Two: Burden Sharing

A common misconception is that President Trump’s America First foreign policy framework was isolationist (McTague and Nicholas, 2020); that it would disengage

the United States from the international community and the multilateral system. Dr. Kiron Skinner, who served as the director of the State Department's Office of Policy Planning during part of the Trump administration, stated in a *Wall Street Journal* opinion editorial in 2018 that "The Trump administration isn't rejecting multilateralism outright. It is embracing multilateralism that works" (Skinner, 2018).

Designed to promote cooperation to address shared global challenges, the multilateral system erected after World War II is based on a series of overlapping institutional frameworks that gained momentum at the end of the Cold War. This is when the notion of "global governance" arose with the 1992 Commission on Global Governance supported by the United Nations (Commission on Global Governance, 1993). Comprised of various working groups, the commission established a framework to weave a "global neighborhood" of institutions to "manage the common affairs" of the community of nations (GDRC, 2023). This commission perhaps best embodies the multilateral mindset prevalent in the 21st century that aims for increased collaboration, but lacks the incentive structure to allow for accountability or performance metrics to ensure that multilateral institutions are achieving their stated goals.

The United States is committed to making the United Nations more effective and accountable. I have said many times that the United Nations has unlimited potential. As part of our reform effort, I have told our negotiators that the United States will not pay more than 25 percent of the UN peacekeeping budget. This will encourage other countries to step up, get involved, and also share in this very large burden. ... Only when each of us does our part and contributes our share can we realize the UN's highest aspirations. We must pursue peace without fear, hope without despair, and security without apology. (*Politico*, 2018)

President Trump identified this deficiency in the multilateral system that prevented many international institutions from advancing its mission, and immediately worked to remedy this. What is known in the social sciences as the "free-rider problem" is pervasive throughout multilateral institutions, which often don't have an accountability mechanism to respond to member states that fail to meet their financial commitments but still receive the benefits from belonging to the multilateral system; a problem generated by an incentive structure that allows free riding nation states to concentrate the benefits of multilateral institutions while dispersing the costs to other nation states that carry the financial burden.

The most common example of the free rider problem in the multilateral system lies within the NATO and the 2 percent of GDP in defense spending investment agreed to by the member nation-states (NATO, 2023). When President Trump came to office in 2017, only six of the 28 member states of NATO were meeting their defense spending

commitments, while the U.S. was providing approximately 22 percent of NATO's direct funding (Browne, 2019). Moreover, American defense expenditure represents almost two-thirds of the defense spending of the entire NATO alliance. There was a point President Trump made at the NATO Leaders meeting in Brussels in May 2017 that began a negotiation process that resulted in at least \$130 billion more being added to defense budgets of NATO members within the next two years (NATO, 2019).

We are making real progress, most importantly on the burden sharing. And your [President Trump's] leadership on defense spending is having a real impact. Since 2016, Canada and European allies have added \$130 billion more to the defense budgets, and this number will increase to 400 billion U.S. dollars by 2024. (NATO, 2019)

Had NATO not had this discussion in recent years, it would be in a weaker position today in the face of increased Russian aggression in Europe. The NATO case is an example of the second fundamental pillar of Trumpism: burden sharing. The principle of burden sharing goes beyond holding multilateral institutions accountable; it changes the mindset of nation-states to understand multilateralism as a tool to achieve greater cooperation and consensus rather than as an end itself (Humire, 2023c). President Trump did not take the value of the multilateral system as a given, and understood that institutions don't reform themselves.

The Trump administration placed a priority on finding where the United States makes a difference in the multilateral system, and where its involvement clashes with U.S. national interest. The withdrawal from the Paris Climate Accord was an example of a situation where the potential effect on the U.S. economy—of meeting carbon emission compliance within the accord—worked against the American economy (Trump, 2017c). According to the National Economic Research Associates, the energy restrictions in the Paris Accord could cost America as much as 2.7 million jobs lost by 2025, and close to \$3 trillion by 2040 (NERA Economic Consulting, 2017). Therefore, despite the international backlash, President Trump moved forward with the four-year exit process of the Paris agreement that took effect in November 2020.

President Trump did not withdraw from the international community, he sought to engage the multilateral system when and where the arrangement was mutually beneficial. And when it was not, his administration sought bilateral arrangements that could accomplish the same goals. For instance, after pulling out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a 12-country multilateral trade deal, President Trump immediately sought bilateral trade agreements with South Korea and Japan—two prominent Asian partners—that he signed in 2018 and 2019, respectively (BBC Editorial Board, 2020).

The Trumpism pillar of burden sharing was not exclusive to the multilateral system; it also extended to bilateral deals with allies and partners worldwide (Kozlowski, 2020). The burden-sharing principle was the catalyst for addressing the mass migration crisis that arose in late 2018 when Central American caravans began moving toward the U.S. southern border.

In 2019, the U.S. was experiencing the highest levels of encounters and apprehensions at its southwest border in more than a decade. For the first six months, more than 100,000 migrants began arriving at the border each month. This prompted the Trump administration to negotiate “safe third country” agreements with Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, inked in July 2019. For the remainder of 2019, southwest border encounters plummeted to as low as 40,000 migrant encounters per month. The Asylum Cooperative Agreements had the underlying premise that Mexico and Central America shared a responsibility with the United States of addressing migrant flows and asylum requests in the Western Hemisphere (Humire, 2023b). Applying the burden-sharing pillar of Trumpism to U.S. immigration policy helped ease the capacity crisis mounting on the U.S. southern border in 2019, and responded to an increasing demand by American citizens to put America First in its international affairs.

CONCLUSION

The foundational foreign policy pillars of Trumpism—nation-state sovereignty and burden sharing—come together to support a vision that America must be strong at home to project power abroad. In many ways, it is a return to the basics of U.S. foreign policy established by the founding fathers. From George Washington’s warning to not get involved with “entangling alliances” to Thomas Jefferson’s “restrictive system” of economic pressure against Europe’s economic coercion of the time (National Park Service, 2017), President Trump’s policies were a remix of America’s original foreign policy that allowed the U.S. to become a global powerhouse in the first place (Trump, 2020).

Some have described President Trump’s focus on the homeland as a throwback to President Andrew Jackson’s original 19th century America First policy (Wagner, 2017), centered on “the physical security and economic well-being of the American people,” as described by historian Walter Russell Mead (2017)—a populist foreign policy that capitalized on the growing spirit of nationalism that dominated America in the 19th century (Dimitrova, 2017). Yet, being the first American president in the 21st century to not start or entrench the United States in a foreign war, can qualify

President Trump as more of a Jeffersonian in international affairs (Niklas, 2021). Trumpism can best be described as a Jacksonian-Jeffersonian foreign policy of a non-interventionist hawk that is in stark contrast to the Wilsonian vision adopted by several recent American presidents from George W. Bush to Barack Obama, who opted for military intervention to chase a global order that is likely impossible to achieve.

Few today believe that America's foreign policy can align with revisionist, autocratic powers—namely Russia and China—that seek to undermine the rules-based international order to impose a new world order of authoritarian governance. Great Power Competition (GPC) is now commonplace in the lexicon of U.S. foreign policy and national security discussions thanks to the 2017 National Security Strategy of the Trump administration. Many supporters and former administration officials of President Trump argue that—setting aside the tone and rhetoric—the foreign policy of the Trump administration focused on strengthening the United States to prepare the country for the future (White House, 2023). They argue that being America First is not being “America alone” and every leader of a sovereign nation-state should put the well-being of its citizens above global governance. And that is only achieved through a new framework that navigates the anarchic nature of the international community through mutual respect and reciprocal relationships among sovereign nation-states that believe in freedom:

Looking around and all over this large, magnificent planet, the truth is plain to see: If you want freedom, take pride in your country. If you want democracy, hold on to your sovereignty. And if you want peace, love your nation. Wise leaders always put the good of their own people and their own country first.” (Trump, 2019)

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