



# Is the Trump Doctrine Sustainable?

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## **The liberal international order has proven remarkably robust, surviving a series of challenges. But it cannot survive the full implementation of Trump's 'America First' policy.**

Every U.S. president in the postwar era has supported a liberal international order (LIO), promoting stable and peaceful interstate relations, open economic relations and individual freedoms in a rules-based system backed by U.S. military power. The LIO promises a relative peace, offering greater freedom, equality and prosperity to more people than any other system. The LIO has been remarkably robust, surviving a series of external and internal challenges. But it cannot survive the full implementation of Trump's 'America First' challenge.

While the rise of Donald Trump has called the LIO into question, there is considerable disagreement as to whether a singular Trump doctrine exists. Some claim the administration's policies are too *incoherent* to qualify as doctrine. Others question whether any president is able to pursue a *unique* foreign policy path in the post-Cold War era.

So, is there a distinctive Trump doctrine and, if so, is it sustainable?

### **Trump's National Security Strategy**

The National Security Strategy (NSS), 'America First', was released on December 17, 2017, in President Trump's first year, a feat unmatched by any president for at least as far back as Ronald Reagan. The NSS outlines the principal national security challenges of the United States and responses to them. As such, it presents a grand strategy for the United States, a plan for how

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the administration will seek to advance the national interest drawing on the political, military, economic, cultural and diplomatic levers of power at its disposal. According to the NSS document, the new Trumpian grand strategy rests on four pillars:

- Protect the American people, the homeland, and the American way of life
- Promote American prosperity
- Preserve peace through strength
- Advance American influence

At first glance, this set of objectives does not seem very different from those espoused by past administrations. All of Trump's predecessors sought to secure US citizens, the integrity of the homeland, and the American way of life through armed defense, missile defense and strong border control. They sought to expand US income and wealth to improve living standards, and to maintain an unparalleled military capability with which to defeat enemies and keep the peace. And they certainly sought to increase US influence over world affairs, to promote US interests and spread American values to every corner of the world. Given these similarities, one might conclude that the grand strategy of liberal hegemony, pursued by the US for more than 70 years, remains both **financially and politically sustainable**. If the Trump doctrine essentially promises more of the same, the postwar policy to which we have grown accustomed can be maintained, and we **need not worry** about the darker consequences, i.e., the less peaceful and less prosperous world that would emerge if the US were to **pull back**.

However, closer scrutiny of the NSS document, as well as the **president's televised speech**, clarifies the new foreign policy orientation, and suggests a distinctive grand strategy, an emerging Trump doctrine that aligns more closely

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with the president's campaign promises, [inaugural speech](#) and later addresses. Pillar by pillar, the 'America First' strategy comprised in the NSS deals four swift blows to American power and constitutes a devastating capitulation of US capability and influence.

### **The foundations of the four pillars**

The first pillar of the Trump doctrine seeks to secure US borders, citizens and America's way of life through conventional security policies and controversial immigration policies, e.g., by building a wall on the Mexican border and by creating a more [selective immigration system](#) "based on individuals' merits and their ability to positively contribute to U.S. society". For many, the [proposed reforms](#) represent a break with the United States' [legacy call to](#) "Give me your tired, your poor. Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free...". To make matters worse, fears of [race-based discrimination](#) in admission programs were aggravated by Trump's alleged [s\\*\\*\\*hole](#) remarks prioritizing immigrants from Norway over immigrants from African countries. It is not entirely clear whether the President uttered these words but his previous [Klan](#), ['birther'](#) and [Charlottesville](#) pronouncements made the sentiment believable to a wide audience. The 'American dilemma', i.e., the contradiction between American liberal ideals and the reality of racial discrimination, is certainly not a recent phenomenon. High office magnifying the gap between ideals and reality is, however, a recent development. The brazen gulf that has emerged between liberal norms of equality and discourse not only tarnishes U.S. legitimacy but breeds anti-Americanism [complicating intelligence gathering efforts abroad](#), thus threatening U.S. national security.

The second pillar of the emerging Trump doctrine is the connection between economics and security. According to the NSS, the administration seeks to

reboot US grand strategy by casting “economic prosperity as a pillar of national security”. Economic prosperity viewed as necessary for national security is not a novel idea. A long lineage of thinkers have viewed economic vitality as the fountain of security, and every postwar US president has supported the twin, mutually reinforcing, goals of opulence and security. But the Trump doctrine, which asserts that “*economic security is national security*”, is new. In fact, the president’s televised catchphrase “economic security” does a better job than the NSS document in conveying the intellectual force behind the new doctrine. The concept of economic security concerns international threats to a nation’s economic welfare, and unwittingly, or not, better aligns with the ‘America-First’ platform from which the president derives political support. With its emphasis on self-sufficiency and protectionist responses to declining competitiveness and job loss, a policy of economic security will clash with past grand strategies organized around liberal hegemony. If what is meant by economic security really is a veiled form of economic nationalism, then it is unlikely to bring the U.S. either prosperity or security. As I have argued [elsewhere](#), the United States has sustained its number one position on virtually every measure of international primacy by adhering to liberal economic policies internationally. Yet the US has failed to redistribute the gains from international cooperation domestically. Since economic strength is essential for achieving security, capturing the highest available pecuniary gains is in the national interest, and an ‘America First’ agenda premised on economic security is unlikely to achieve that objective.

The third pillar seeks to preserve peace through armed strength, heralding U.S. military primacy. The pursuit of military preeminence has been a hallmark of US foreign policy since Franklin D. Roosevelt’s emphasis on “big stick diplomacy”. During Obama’s last year in office (2016), discretionary defense spending

amounted to \$580 billion roughly 3.2% of GDP, the first increase since sequestration began in 2011. President Trump has requested \$639 billion for FY 2018, representing a \$52 billion increase in base funding and fairly constant OCO (Overseas Contingency Operations) funding. Compared to 2017, the White House budget proposes a \$25 billion increase in defense spending and an \$18 billion reduction in non-defense spending. The \$18 billion figure excludes the \$3 billion increase for the border wall and the implementation of executive orders by ICE the immigration enforcement agency unlikely to take a cold during routine government shutdowns. Preoccupation with America's debt is the official reason why the defense "increase will be offset by targeted reductions elsewhere":

**“ “We are fast approaching having publicly held debt at or exceeding 100 percent of our Gross Domestic Product (GDP), a point at which hopes for a more prosperous future are irrevocably lost.” ”**

Regardless of whether military spending is cut to prioritize non-defense spending or vice versa, this public debt scare has informed predictions of US decline since the 1980s. If the NSS truly seeks to promote economic security and national security, as it says in pillar two, refraining from tax cuts would be a better way of balancing the budget to check public debt. Another important grand strategic update is the inclusion of Trump's oft-stated expectation for

allies “to shoulder a fair share of the burden of responsibility to protect against common threats,” a condition which could conflict with the fourth pillar.

The fourth pillar asks for the spread of US values and interests around the world, a task which is becoming more difficult. The administration’s transactional approach to dealing with allies and its pledge to defend “America’s sovereignty without apology” is problematic in this regard. If it reflects U.S. assertion of impunity to do what it wants regardless of other’s interests, it will be hard to make friends in foreign capitols. If it reflects a license for all states to push their national interest without regard for other states’ interests, we are in a classic Prisoner’s Dilemma where the available gains from cooperation are not fully realized, leaving everyone worse off. In addition, the uncertainty surrounding whether the president is opportunistically courting the far-right portion of his base, or is actually racially and religiously intolerant, is a blemish on U.S. values, creating a double standard, however elegantly the U.S. preaches respect for human rights.

If the U.S. turns its back on allies, and or find fewer people on the ground willing to cooperate with U.S. intelligence, there will be less “bang” for every buck spent on defense, ratcheting up expenditures to achieve the same level of safety. If what is really meant by economic security is protectionism and tax cuts that disproportionately benefit the wealthy, the U.S. as a whole will be less affluent. Protectionism does not have to become official policy to have detrimental effects. Talks of trade retaliation against China not only risks sparking a mutually destructive tariff war. It could reduce support for the dollar’s global role, particularly Chinese support. If negative feedback between America’s commercial and financial status cuts into U.S. wealth, then calls to raise U.S. living standards for more Americans, to which Trump’s rallying cry

was a response, will amplify. With higher security costs supported by a more fragile economic base, the positive synergies between U.S. economic and security policy will quickly erode. These policies have not yet been enacted, and hopefully they will not be enacted. The massive shift in international economic policies 'America First' promises may just be a ruse for a power grab. That is the best-case scenario since the sustainability of the Trump doctrine, what it means for the US and the future of the LIO, depends on how distinctive it really is.

The LIO has persisted through massive external challenges, including the epic battle for power and influence with the Soviet Union. Seventy years on, the postwar order can continue to thrive despite the idiosyncrasies of the 45<sup>th</sup> president. But if Trump's 'America First' challenge to the United States and the rest of the world were to be fully implemented, the order will no longer be liberal. An alternative order will emerge, the contours of which depend on how other states respond to the Trump doctrine.

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**Carla Norrlof** is associate professor at the University of Toronto where she specializes in international relations and international political economy. For recent commentary on US foreign policy see, '[Hegemony and inequality: Trump and the liberal playbook](#)' (with *International Affairs*), and '[The waning of Pax Americana?](#)' (with *Great Decisions, Foreign Policy Association*).

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