

# Trump's Jacksonian Foreign Policy and its Implications for European Security\*

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## **The Domestic Roots of Trump's Foreign Policy**

To understand what is likely to drive Trump, it is important to understand the domestic context in which he operates. Efforts to categorize him as isolationist or internationalist, hawk or dove, realist or idealist do little to help one understand Trump's domestic political base, which serves as the starting point to understand his foreign and security policies. After all, it's the politics, stupid.

Over the course of American history, four great political traditions have shaped the way Americans have tended to debate how their country should relate to the rest of the world.<sup>1</sup> Two of these traditions – the Jacksonians and the Jeffersonians – look largely inward, whereas the other two – Wilsonians and Hamiltonians – gaze outward.

Trump owes his election to a surge of Jacksonian anger. Understanding these traditions, particularly Jacksonianism, is key to understanding Trump.

Wilsonianism is the tradition most known to non-Americans. It is rooted in the belief that the United States is a nation set apart by its values and principles, and that America best advances the cause of peace by spreading democratic values and institutions elsewhere in the world – including by force, if necessary. During the post-Cold War period, Wilsonians embraced the opportunity to work with allies and new democracies to enlarge the democratic space within Europe where war simply doesn't happen. They favored the enlargement of the European Union and of NATO. Wilsonians believe that multilateral organizations, codes of international conduct and initiatives such as arms con-

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trol can extend such bedrock American values as respect for human rights and the rule of law.

The Hamiltonian tradition is named after Alexander Hamilton, the America's first Secretary of the Treasury. Hamiltonians believe that the United States has a profound interest in maintaining a relatively open, international trading and financial order. Hamiltonians are great-power internationalists who readily speak of the 'national interest' and 'the balance of power', and would fit most readily in the 'realist' category. Hamiltonians view open international commerce, framed by a predictable world order based on international law, as a potential cause of peace. These beliefs have led Hamiltonians to champion US efforts to ensure freedom of the seas, freedom of the skies, an open door for American goods, and an international legal and financial order that permits the broadest possible global trade.

The domestic alliance between Hamiltonians and Wilsonians – both of which look outward to the world – has been a powerful force in U.S. foreign policy, but it has not always carried the day. Two other traditions have also been influential, each of which are much more focused on the state of America at home than its position in the world.

One of these traditions is named after Thomas Jefferson, America's third President and the principal author of the Declaration of Independence. Rather than acting on the crusading impulse of the Wilsonians to promote democratic revolutions abroad or on the Hamiltonian interest in constructing an ambitious global order, Jeffersonians believe that America is best suited to be an exemplar for others by fulfilling the democratic promise of its revolution at home. They argue that breathless talk of spreading liberty, democracy, freedom of speech, civil rights and civil society abroad ignores the daily reality that such princi-

ples are honored in the breach by racial segregation or discrimination against Americans and others at home. They insist that the American model will only be seen as relevant for other people when others can see that America's model works for its own people.

Jeffersonians are not knee-jerk isolationists. They do not oppose peaceful commercial relations or mutually beneficial interactions with other nations. But they are preoccupied with the gap between America's aspirations and its achievements. They believe liberty can be subverted as easily from within as from without. They fear excessive concentration of economic, military or potential power domestically as well as internationally. And they are worried that overstretch abroad can absorb needed resources for domestic challenges. They embrace America's system of checks and balances, constitutional restrictions on excessive power and the role of the Congress in foreign policy. This translates into support for a limited foreign policy that defines US international interests narrowly. Barack Obama is at heart a Jeffersonian, and he presided over a coalition of Jeffersonians and Hamiltonians.

Perhaps the least understood and most baffling of the four American traditions for Europeans – and the one where Donald Trump is most at home – is Jacksonianism, named for Andrew Jackson, the country's seventh President, who in the 1820s upended the established political order by instituting universal white male suffrage, remade the party system and introduced mass electoral politics. Jacksonianism is more an amorphous expression of anti-establishment populist culture than an intellectual or political movement. Jacksonians are sovereigntists who assert that the prime goal of U.S. domestic and foreign policy must be the physical security and economic prosperity of the American people. They are instinctively democratic and populist, and skeptical of domestic or foreign 'do-

gooding' (welfare at home, foreign aid abroad), which causes them to distrust federal authority, support a strong military, the death penalty, federal support for the middle class, and value highly the Bill of Rights – particularly the Second Amendment to the Constitution, which enshrines the right to bear arms as the 'citadel of liberty'.

Jacksonians believe that Americans must remain vigilant and well-armed in a dangerous world. They are ready and willing to do whatever it takes to defend the United States. Jacksonians do not like limited wars for limited goals. Although they value allies and believe that the United States must honor its word, they do not believe in institutional constraints on America's freedom to act, unilaterally if necessary, in self-defense. They share the Jeffersonian preference for selective or limited engagement with the outside world, but they are also least tolerant of Jeffersonian efforts to restrict or limit American power. They do not support free trade and are wary of the loss of economic autonomy implied by trade liberalization and economic interdependence. They are least likely to support Wilsonian initiatives for a better world, have the least regard for international law and practice, and are the least willing to support Hamiltonian strategies of balanced engagement.

The original "American First" movement formed in 1940 to keep the United States out of yet another European war; their influence was significant until the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. The modern expression of the Jacksonian tradition, the Tea Party movement, came to life about the same time as Barack Obama took office in January 2009. It encompasses an inchoate assemblage of individuals and groups that range from center right to the far fringes of American political life, but united under such slogans as "America first."

Jacksonians view European allies as potential value-added partners when it comes to confronting a hostile Russia or curbing Middle East security threats, but bristle whenever they perceive Europeans free-riding on American defense expenditures or acting to bolster the liberal order, help America's enemies via trade or other means, constrain American sovereignty or freedom of action, or extend European ways to American shores.

### **Trump's Jacksonian Instincts**

If Hillary Clinton had become the first female president of the United States, she would have preferred to preside over a coalition of Wilsonians and Hamiltonians, much like her husband did – but the pull of the Jeffersonian tradition, as personified by both Barack Obama and Bernie Sanders, was very strong. In the end, she could not bring those three disparate strands together, and lost enough Jeffersonian voters to make the difference for Trump.

Donald Trump mainly succeeded, however, by tapping Jacksonian anger with his call to "build a wall" to keep out Mexican migrants, blasting free trade deals as "sell-outs" to China and other countries, questioning the need for alliances such as NATO, and scolding European, Japanese and Korean allies as "free-riders" living off of the largesse of the American taxpayer. Trump's victory has given voice and power to this American political tradition in ways that have mystified foreign observers. But the Jacksonian tradition has always reflected a significant minority opinion across the American political landscape. In Trump, Jacksonianism is experiencing an historical revival.

A Jacksonian foreign policy puts America first. It is unilateral at heart. It favors hard power over soft power. It seeks to shed burdens, not to share them. Jacksonians are not interested in the promotion of democracy or multilateral processes. Trump

wants to slash U.S. support for the United Nations, gut U.S. development assistance, and abandon U.S. commitments under the Paris Climate Change accord. He is wary of the permanent bureaucracy in Washington, and is purposefully acting slowly to fill key administration positions. He will not support plurilateral trade deals, could start a trade war with China, and may challenge the WTO. He will boost U.S. military spending considerably. He wants to restructure and downsize the State Department. One casualty is likely to be the State Department's Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations, which means that such operations will fall almost exclusively to the Pentagon.

### **Instincts vs. Interests**

Understanding the domestic roots of Trump's foreign policy also means understanding that domestic factors may also constrain some of Trump's more radical instincts.

First, other key officials in his administration, notably his national security adviser H.R. McMaster and his Defense Secretary, James Mattis, have a more conventional appreciation of U.S. interests and values, and how they must be protected and advanced in a world of diffuse power and intensified global competition. They have been able to temper the President's instincts with regard to NATO, Russia, China and the Middle East.

Second, the President is confronted by members of Congress – both Democrats and Republicans – who are fiercely committed to NATO, far tougher on Russia, far more supportive of Ukraine, and far less willing to gut key elements of U.S. foreign policy, such as the State Department or development assistance. President Trump has also run up against the power of the judiciary, which has blocked the most egregious aspects of his efforts to impose travel bans on foreign visitors.

Third, Trump must face the "Blob in the Swamp" – the gaggle of Republican and Democratic former officials, media commentators, opinion writers and think tankers who largely oppose the main lines of his evolving foreign policy. President Obama's former speechwriter Ben Rhodes referred to this Washington establishment derisively as "the Blob," and President Trump was elected on a platform to "drain the swamp" of entrenched Washington interests. But the Blob in the Swamp has a hold on the media, the public, and elite opinion, and has been successful in casting a spotlight on some of Trump's more questionable activities, such as the nature of his campaign's ties to Russia, or possible conflicts of interest related to his business operations.

Finally, most Presidents have presided over a coalition of at least two of the four traditions outlined earlier. A Presidency, such as Trump's, that rests on support of only one of those four traditions is unlikely to be sustainable over time, and Trump already faces considerable opposition from Wilsonians, Hamiltonians, and Jeffersonians alike, which is reflected in his low public approval ratings. This reality will limit his influence at home and frustrate his ambitions abroad.

These domestic considerations suggest that the foreign and security policies pursued by the Trump administration may ultimately turn out to be more conventional than his nationalist supporters hope or his critics fear. He has conspicuously failed to follow through on some of his most radical foreign policy pledges. He has not ripped up the Iran nuclear deal. He has not moved the US embassy in Israel to Jerusalem. He has switched from open hostility to the EU, which he likes to call "the consortium," to cautious support. He spent most of his campaign trail castigating NATO, only to embrace it shortly after his inauguration. He has not held a bromantic summit with Vladimir Putin. The outcome of the first

U.S.-China summit of the Trump years turned out to be more conventional than Trump's campaign rhetoric had suggested. Trump's decision to unleash a volley of cruise missiles on Syria in response to the Assad regime's use of chemical weapons was roundly applauded by the "Blob in the Swamp", most of whom are united in the view that America's willingness to use military power is crucial both to its global standing and to the stability of the world order.<sup>2</sup>

In short, Trump's policies may be tempered – but Trump himself will remain temperamental. Even as he has opened the door to a more traditional American engagement with the world, he has demonstrated a highly improvisational and situational approach that could inject a risky unpredictability into relations with friends and foes alike. Trump's about-face on the Assad regime demonstrates his volatile nature. "I like to think of myself as a very flexible person," he has said. "I don't like to say where I'm going and what I'm doing."<sup>3</sup> For these reasons, a clear "Trump Doctrine" is unlikely to emerge anytime soon.

### **Implications for European Security**

This tension between temperance and temperament is likely to characterize U.S. foreign and security policy during the next four years. It suggests a continued U.S. commitment to NATO, including a forward U.S. military presence in Europe, but with greater pressure on European allies to step up their own efforts. It suggests greater burdens for America's European allies and partners, and raises the possibility that improvised responses to unanticipated events could roil relations in unpredictable ways.

While Jacksonians approach Europe from a very different perspective than Wilsonians, Hamiltonians or Jeffersonians, they share enough similarities to shape a core consen-

sus about U.S. interests with regard to Europe.

First, there is widespread consensus that the United States has an enduring interest in a Europe that is hospitable to freedom and open to American goods, investments, and ideas. Jacksonians are far less willing than others to invest significant energy or resources to advance this interest, but they recognize that America's democracy is likely to be more secure in a world in which other democracies also flourish.

Second, there is widespread consensus that the United States has an interest in a Europe that is free of the kind of strife that drains inordinate resources from the United States and the rest of the world. Jacksonians would be the first to cheer if Europeans proved capable of resolving European conflicts on their own. Unfortunately, this has not proven to be the case, as demonstrated by the Russian-Ukrainian and Russian-Georgian conflicts, the Balkan wars of the 1990s, and in America's military presence, its peacekeeping forces, and its efforts at reconciliation and reassurance that – at European invitation – continue today. All four traditions perceive Moscow's defiance of Europe's prevailing security order as challenging U.S. interests in a Europe at peace, even if they are at odds over what the United States should do about it.

Third, there is common agreement that the United States has a keen interest in a confident, capable, outward-looking Europe with which it can work to address a range of challenges that no nation can tackle effectively alone. While Jacksonians are reluctant to invest American energy or resources in global do-gooding, they are not averse to seeing other countries solve problems so that the American cavalry is not forced to come to their assistance in the end.

## The Agenda for NATO and Partners

These core interests will continue to guide U.S. policies, although the Trump administration comes to the issues differently from previous administrations.

The most important frame will be the Trump administration's approach to NATO. Trump, Mattis and Tillerson have emphasized two basic priorities in this regard.

First, the administration wants each NATO ally to produce by the end of 2017 a concrete plan demonstrating how and when it will spend 2% of GDP on defense, with 20% allocated to the modernization of equipment and infrastructure. Critical ally and partner capability shortfalls remain, including strategic lift; intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR); deployable command and control; air to air refueling; and air and missile defense.

This will be the main take-away from the Summit, which is largely intended as a "get-to-know-you" event. Allied failure to agree to produce such plans by the end of the year, however, is likely to cause a serious rift with the administration and could prompt unpredictable reactions from the President.

Second, the administration wants to prioritize the fight against terrorism in its efforts. NATO has been engaged on this front, notably in Afghanistan, but will need to sharpen its terrorist-fighting message. It can do so by reinforcing the Warsaw Summit decision to continue with Operation Resolute Support, including pledges already extended for financial assistance through 2020. The Pentagon has already requested greater U.S. troop presence in Afghanistan for training and ultimately as a rapid response force. NATO can also put the anti-terrorist tag on its Warsaw Summit decision to boost cyber defenses and to put the concept of national resilience at the

center of defense efforts. A third Warsaw Summit decision, on defense capacity building, can also be framed as an anti-terrorism initiative, with its emphasis on defense reform, training local forces, and defense education in countries like Iraq and Jordan. Beyond these areas, the U.S. is likely to underscore the need for the Alliance to develop a clearer southern strategy, with new tools to implement it and a better understanding of how NATO can fit within the broad array of coalitions and groupings that are currently active fighting terrorism in Africa and the Middle East.

This raises difficult issues with NATO ally Turkey. Relations between Washington and Ankara are strained by many issues, including U.S. support for Kurdish groups fighting ISIS when President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is fighting his own war with Kurdish separatists in Turkey.

Other important NATO issues are below the Presidential radar screen, which means that continuity, rather than change, is likely to be the watchword. The administration has reinforced its commitment to the European Reassurance Initiative of \$3.4 billion annually, which has funded renewed U.S. forward presence in Europe, and to NATO's Warsaw Summit initiatives, particularly forward deployment of NATO multinational battalions to the Baltic states and Poland. Two U.S. Brigade Combat teams are permanently deployed in Europe (in Germany and Italy). A third heavy U.S. Brigade Combat Team (BCT) is being forward deployed to NATO's east on a heel-to-toe rotational basis. Equipment for a fourth U.S. BCT is also being forward deployed to Europe to facilitate reinforcement. Military exercises are near continual. The Ukrainian and Georgian militaries are receiving additional U.S. training. Continued congressional support for ERI will enable EUCOM to continue its contribution to NATO's Air Policing mission, provide for additional anti-submarine warfare capabilities complementing mari-

time domain awareness assets in Iceland, and support rotational Marine units operating from Norway and the Black Sea region.

It is likely that the administration will continue U.S. efforts to implement other Warsaw Summit decisions, such as improving NATO's situational awareness and decision making in crisis and advancing NATO-EU partnership. The U.S. believes the next priority for the Alliance is to enhance the readiness and sustainability of national Follow-on-Forces to deal with contingencies in the east, and to strengthen the command structure needed to manage such forces. These Follow-on-Forces, if deployed, would most likely face an Anti-access Area-denial (A2/AD) environment in which Russian combat aircraft, air defenses, submarines, anti-ship cruise missiles, special forces, space and cyber assets would make it difficult for NATO's reinforcing units to arrive and operate.

The major uncertainty remains the administration's approach to Russia. U.S.-Russian ties are arguably the worst since before the Gorbachev era. U.S. and Russian leaders share limited amount of interests and very different world views of what drives the international system. Despite Trump's reluctance to criticize Russia and his hints that he might recognize Moscow's annexation of Crimea and review Ukraine-related sanctions as ways to pursue warmer ties with Putin, administration spokesmen have stuck to more traditional approaches. Secretary of State Tillerson, Secretary of Defense Mattis, and U.S. Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley have all called Russia's claims on Crimea "illegitimate," stated that the U.S. will continue to hold Russia accountable to its Minsk commitments, and that U.S. sanctions against Russia will remain in place until Moscow reverses the actions it has taken there. They have also criticized Russian activities in Syria and in Afghanistan, and Mattis has called out the Putin regime for "mucking

around" in other people's elections – a particularly notable claim coming at a time when federal and congressional investigators are probing alleged Russian meddling in the 2016 U.S. elections.

Trump's view of Putin has also evolved, and he believes that in the current atmosphere – with so much media scrutiny and ongoing probes into Trump-Russia ties and election meddling – it won't be possible to "make a deal," as the President himself has framed it. The best that may be expected is agreement to reduce the risk of inadvertent incidents that could lead to major conflict; to manage differences in ways that do not allow them to erupt; and to contain other potential disruptions from third issue areas.

As the administration's approach to Russia continues to evolve, it is likely to be influenced by a U.S. decision whether to supply lethal defense aid to Ukraine, for which there is strong support in the Congress, and debate over Russia's violation of the INF Treaty.

The U.S. has declared that Russia has deployed a land-based cruise missile that violates the spirit and intent of the INF Treaty. Prospects for Russia returning to compliance are not good. The U.S. is likely to respond strongly by accelerating the modernization of U.S. strategic delivery systems, including a new ballistic missile submarine, a new intercontinental ballistic missile, a new strategic bomber (the B-21), and a new air-launched nuclear cruise missile (the Long-Range Stand-off system, or LRSO) which will provide the U.S. with the ability to penetrate Russia's sophisticated air defenses. The U.S. is also likely to push ahead with plans to improve its air- and sea-launched conventional strike capabilities, including a conventional version of the LRSO. Finally, it is also likely to consider ways to make available to more allies and partners its Joint Air-to-Surface Standoff Missile (JASSM); the extended-

range variant of the missile, JASSM-ER; and Tomahawk sea-launched cruise missile (SLCM).

## Conclusion

Americans and Europeans have become accustomed to consulting and often acting together to address unpredictable countries and crises in many parts of the world. Today, America and Europe themselves have become unpredictable partners. Disruptive change is not unique to the United States; Europe faces a conflation of crises – migration, terrorism, Russian aggression, Brexit, low and uneven growth, high youth unemployment and significant debt challenges in many countries, the cancer of "illiberal democracy" – that have unsettled European polities, economies, and security policies. On both sides of the Atlantic, the traditional political divisions between right and left have given way to divides between those seeking to open societies and reap benefits generated by greater international engagement, and those who want to shield and protect their societies from such forces, which they believe are disruptive and even subversive. The potential for sudden and unanticipated challenges will remain high for the foreseeable future, and will test the resilience of this transatlantic partnership.

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## End notes

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<sup>1</sup> These traditions have been captured well by scholars such as Walter Russell Mead in his book *Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How it Changed the World*, or David Hackett Fisher in his book *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America*.

<sup>2</sup> See Gideon Rachman, "How the Washington blob swallowed Donald Trump," *Financial Times*, April 10, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Baker, "The Emerging Trump Doctrine: Don't Follow Doctrine," *New York Times*, April 8, 2017.



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