THE BIG THINK

An insider explains the president's foreign policy.

BY MICHAEL ANTON
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Two years into U.S. President Donald Trump's tenure, there is still endemic confusion about what, exactly, his foreign policy is. Many critics blame this confusion on the president's purported inarticulateness. Whatever one thinks of his tweets, however, the fact is that he has also delivered a number of speeches that lay bare the roots, contours, and details of his approach to the world.

A simpler—and more accurate—explanation for the confusion is that Trump's foreign policy does not yet have a widely accepted name. Names can be useful in sorting and cataloguing ideas and in avoiding the unnecessary elaboration of things everyone already knows. But to dredge up an old philosophic argument: The name is not the thing. The underlying phenomenon is what matters; the name is just shorthand. Yet too often the U.S. foreign-policy establishment—current and former officials, international relations professors, think tankers, and columnists—uses names as a crutch. People treat names as sacrosanct categories and can't process things not yet named.

So the fact that Trump is not a neoconservative or a paleoconservative, neither a traditional realist nor a liberal internationalist, has caused endless confusion. The same goes for the fact that he has no inborn inclination to

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isolationism or interventionism, and he is not simply a dove or a hawk. His foreign policy doesn't easily fit into any of these categories, though it draws from all of them.

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Yet Trump does have a consistent foreign policy: a Trump Doctrine. The administration calls it "principled realism," which isn't bad—although the term hasn't caught on. The problem is that the Trump Doctrine, like most presidential doctrines, cannot be summed up in two words. (To see for yourself, try describing the Monroe, Truman, or Reagan Doctrine with just a couple of words.) Yet Trump himself has explained it, on multiple occasions. In perhaps his most overlooked, understudied speech—delivered at the APEC CEO Summit in Da Nang, Vietnam, in November 2017—he encapsulated his approach to foreign policy with a quote from The Wizard of Oz: "There's no place like home." Two months earlier, speaking to the U.N. General Assembly, he made the same point by referring to a "great reawakening of nations."

In both cases, the president was not simply noting what was going on: a resurgence of patriotic or nationalist sentiment in nearly every corner of the world but especially in parts of Europe and the United States. He was also forthrightly saying that this trend was positive. He was encouraging countries already on this path to continue down it and exhorting others not yet there to pursue it.

The other, more familiar phrase for the president's foreign policy —"America First"—is much maligned, mostly for historical reasons. But the phrase itself is almost tautologically unobjectionable. After all, what else is the purpose of any country's foreign policy except to put its own interests, the interests of its citizens, first?

Few countries ever act exclusively out of self-interest. Indeed, states sometimes do things that run counter to their immediate interests. For instance, it's rarely in a country's direct interest, narrowly construed, to

accept refugees. Yet many countries do so because their leaders have concluded that welcoming the dispossessed serves some higher good.

That said, one never sees nations sacrificing themselves for other nations, the way individuals sometimes do—by fighting for their country, for example. In this sense, Thomas Hobbes is instructive: All countries live in the state of nature vis-à-vis one another. Not only is there no superseding authority, no world government, above the nation-state to enforce transnational morality; there is also no higher law for nations than the law of nature and no higher object than self-preservation and perpetuation.

For all its bluntness and simplicity, America First is, at its root, just a restatement of this truth. Countries putting their own interests first is the way of the world, an inexpugnable part of human nature. Like other aspects of human nature, it can be sublimated or driven underground for a time—but only for a time. You may drive out nature with a pitchfork, Horace said, but it keeps on coming back.

The practical effect of suppressing nature, moreover, is likely to have damaging long-term effects. At a minimum, it will produce a backlash, as we're already seeing in the United States, the United Kingdom, and elsewhere in Europe. Another, underappreciated danger is that, in declining to act in their interests, Western and democratic countries create opportunities for unfriendly powers, unashamed to act in their interests, to exploit what they see as Western naiveté. This observation forms the core of what one might call the negative formulation of Trump's foreign policy. The president himself has an inelegant, but not inaccurate, way of putting it: "Don't be a chump."

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There is also a more positive formulation of the president's approach, which begins with an observation about human nature and attempts to make a virtue of necessity. It can be stated like this: Let's all put our own countries first, and be candid about it, and recognize that it's nothing to be ashamed of. Putting our interests first will make us all safer and more prosperous.

If there is a Trump Doctrine, that's it.

Perhaps the key point—at a time when many view self-interest (at least when practiced by democracies) as evil and see international self-abnegation as the height of justice—is Trump's recognition that there's nothing wrong with looking out for No. 1.

This notion is very hard for some to accept. And to be clear, by "some" I mean the foreign-policy establishment, the academic and intellectual elite, and the opinion-making classes—in short, the traditional readers of Foreign Policy.

In his wonderful 2018 book, *The Virtue of Nationalism*, the Israeli political philosopher Yoram Hazony sums up elite conventional wisdom on the subject with the assertion that "nationalism caused two world wars and the Holocaust." That belief is the deepest root of opposition to Trump's foreign policy and to European populism: When certain people hear Trump talk, they think they're hearing jackboots marching.

When many Western thinkers look at the international order these days, they boil things down to a dichotomy between democracy (good) and authoritarianism (bad). Hazony agrees that the basis for world order does rest on a dichotomy, but he offers two very different root principles: empire versus something like nationalism.

Hazony's is far more useful and persuasive than the other approach. To see why, consider, first, that the dichotomy between democracies and

authoritarian regimes focuses on regime types—that is, domestic or internal arrangements. Hazony's alternatives, on the other hand, look directly at international concerns. This is not to say that regime type is unimportant in international affairs. But it is not definitive. Countries as well as empires can be democratic or despotic.

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Before taking this point any further, it's necessary to make an even more elementary point. As thinkers since the ancient Greeks have recognized, all political entities—from the smallest village to the largest empire—are based on a distinction between insiders and outsiders, between those who belong and those who do not, between citizens or subjects and foreigners. The important distinction, then, is not between universalism and particularity—the state will always be particular. The key question is how far the latter can safely or wisely be taken in the direction of the former.

In *Politics*, Aristotle makes a point similar to Hazony when he writes that the three fundamental political units are the tribe, the polis (or "city-state"), and the empire. "Tribe" here is a loose rendering of the Greek *ethne*, the root of the English word "ethnic," which is often also translated as "nation" in the sense of "distinct people."

The ethne and the polis are not merely (more or less) homogenous; the whole point of their existence, their key organizing principle—whether they are democratic or autocratic—is precisely this homogeneity. Empires, on the other hand, are by definition multiethnic.

Now, the ancient Greeks knew that it was hard to find in nature any precise boundary where one ethne ended and another began. What distinguished a Spartan from an Athenian, apart from their very different regimes? What made them ethnically different? After all, they both looked similar, both

spoke Greek, both followed similar customs, and both worshiped the same gods (in particular Athena, whom both looked to as their patron). On occasion, the two city-states could even unite against a common threat. Yet they could also just as easily charge at one another's throats.

Clearly, they were both Greek, but that didn't necessarily make them the same people. Indeed, despite the blurriness of these lines, it was important to the Athenians and the Spartans—as it has been to all human beings in all times and places—to sort themselves into distinct tribes and nations. Doing so is an integral part of human nature. Sometimes natural or naturalistic factors help drive this process: Peoples living on opposite sides of some formidable geographic barrier, for instance, tend to think of themselves as distinct from one another. Other dividing factors, such as language and customs, are conventional or man-made (if not self-consciously so). But all these different factors, whether physical, geographic, or conventional in origin, are natural in the sense that they direct and inform a tendency that is inherent in human nature.

Another way to explain this tendency is by referring to the classical concept of "love of one's own." As we all know, our own may—or may not—be intrinsically loveable. Yet how many of us would want to look around our Thanksgiving table and see none of our relatives? Maybe a few of us. But even if we could replace them all—especially that loudmouthed, "Make America Great Again"-hat-wearing uncle—with people who were better educated, better dressed, better looking, and better conversationalists, the vast majority of us would still say no. We'd miss that uncle after all.

Love of one's own extends beyond the family to the clan, to the tribe, and to the nation. Human beings have always organized themselves around some concept of civic friendship that takes the bonds of family and extends them outward—but not indefinitely. On a fundamental level, politics is about banding together to do together what can't be done (or done well) alone.

So there will always be nations, and trying to suppress nationalist sentiment is like trying to suppress nature: It's very hard, and dangerous, to do.

That's the problem with imperialism: It requires the crushing of natural nationalist feelings through violence. Which is why the wisest thinkers of the past, from Plato and Aristotle to Niccolò Machiavelli and Montesquieu, were all anti-imperialist (even if the latter two aren't always recognized as such).

Let's start with the Greeks, with Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*, his highly didactic and not very accurate biography of Cyrus the Great. Xenophon depicts in great detail how, in transforming the small homogenous city-state of Persia into a vast multiethnic empire, Cyrus created a polity that was far larger, mightier, richer, and more technologically advanced than its forerunner. But Xenophon also takes pain to emphasize the costs of this project, which included a decline in good government, the loss of liberty for Persia's citizens, and an erasure of the individual characters of the empire's formerly independent but now subservient nations. Since the free spirit of captured nations never entirely dies, their peoples always remain potential threats, so Cyrus had to maintain a massive internal spying and security apparatus, which further curtailed liberty. And if all that weren't bad enough, on Cyrus's death the whole system collapsed—illustrating imperialism's inherent instability.

As for Machiavelli, his *Discourses*—generally considered one of the most explicitly pro-imperialist books ever written—shows how, like Persia, the rise of the Roman Empire resulted in the loss of liberty and republicanism, this time for 1,500 years. It also led to the subordination of free thought to stultifying authority and the degradation of humans into a kind of slave.

Montesquieu's *Considerations on the Causes of the Grandeur of the Romans and Their Decadence* also deals with Rome, in this case by tracing its birth, rise, maturity, decline, and death. Montesquieu's conclusions are more or less the same as Machiavelli's, but he also has a contemporary point to make: that, having been accomplished once, the dismal project of empire building should never be repeated. His message was targeted, quietly but directly, against the European monarchs of his time, especially France's House of Bourbon, only recently thwarted in its attempt to erase the

Pyrenees and expand French dominion into Germany, northern Italy, and the Low Countries.

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What does any of this have to do with our current situation? The answer is, everything: for while traditional empires may have gone out of fashion, globalization has taken its place as the imperialism of our time. Globalization represents an attempt to do through peaceful means—the creation of transnational institutions, the erosion of borders, and the homogenization of intellectual, cultural, and economic products—what the Romans (and Cyrus and others) achieved through arms.

No surprise, then, that globalization and imperialism suffer from the same flaws. Like the latter, the former is also hubristic and prone to overreach. It also erodes and even subverts and attacks liberty. It requires centralization.

Globalization also has the same stifling impact on ideas, and for the same reasons, that Machiavelli diagnosed as a problem with imperialism 500 years ago. Globalization reduces differences in thought in any number of ways: through media consolidation, for example, or through the homogenization of the elite—who these days all seem to come from the same background, attend the same schools, and go to the same conferences. The champions of globalization also aren't above stooping to outright censorship and coercion when threatened. Indeed, this impulse is perhaps the most important root of political correctness.

Defenders of globalization will respond that whereas imperialism—globalization by conquest—amounts to theft and enslavement and is inherently violent, today's globalization is voluntary.

But is it really? It certainly doesn't feel that way to the people all over the world who have seen their culture, traditions, communities, and economies disappear before their eyes. And this transformation has been voluntary

only in the sense that it has been undertaken with the full approval of the elite. As for the common folk, not so much.

The European Union provides the most illustrative example. Every member state consented to join through some formal mechanism—typically, a legislative vote or a referendum. But further consolidation was often highly contested, with parliamentary votes or referendums frequently coming very close—as in France's "*petit oui*" to the Maastricht Treaty creating the EU in 1992—or else rejected—as in the case of Denmark that same year, when the government then resubmitted the question to the electorate after making cosmetic changes to ensure its wanted result. This doesn't end up sounding like consent in the meaningful sense of the word.

The EU, moreover, was a fraud from the beginning, even before a single referendum was held. It was sold to the European public on false pretenses: It was supposed to make travel easier and lower trade barriers and the other costs of doing business across borders while allowing states to maintain their sovereignty and citizens their individuality. But if anyone had forthrightly told European voters that "Brussels is going to henceforth regulate the size and shape of your vegetables and dictate your immigration and border policies," most would have instantly replied, "No, thanks."

As we've already established, nationalism and national sovereignty are intrinsic to human nature. So it should come as no surprise that the EU's attempt to tamp it down provoked a populist revolt, embodied by the rise of the yellow vest movement in France, Italian Interior Minister Matteo Salvini, Poland's Law and Justice party, the Brexit process, and Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban.

This brings us back to Trump, since the first pillar of his foreign policy is a simple recognition of this overlooked reality: that populism is a result of all this enforced leveling and homogenization. The backlash was brewing long before Trump became a presidential candidate and would have found a champion with or without him. But he saw it first and seized on it by telling the discontented that he heard them, that their grievances were valid, and that he would speak on their behalf.

Since taking office, the president has recoupled U.S. foreign policy to domestic politics, a bond that had become increasingly frayed in recent decades. Since the end of the Cold War, most U.S. foreign policies—apart from the patriotic surge in support for an aggressive response to the 9/11 attacks—have rarely commanded anything like majority support but instead have been tailored to meet only elite concerns. Try explaining to average Americans the need for NATO expansion, democracy promotion in the Middle East, or endless trade concessions to modern-day mercantilists in Asia and Europe. On some level, U.S. leaders must know that the task is futile, because they hardly try. You're just supposed to know that it's in America's interests to remain in NATO—even if its member states shirk their responsibilities and the organization doesn't do very much, least of all in its own back yard.

This is not to disparage the phenomenon of elite leadership. Sometimes a country's leaders really are right about some far-reaching aspect of policy that's nonetheless hard to explain to the public. This is one reason why so many philosophers argue for an aristocratic or at least mixed regime, which allows the elite to pursue a foreign policy that the people lack the foresight and expertise to understand, let alone execute. In the U.S. example, the country's elites saw the need to wage the Cold War much earlier and more clearly than the public. But those elites never took public support for granted; on the contrary, they carefully cultivated it throughout the struggle.

GLOBALIZATION REPRESENTS AN ATTEMPT TO DO THROUGH PEACEFUL MEANS WHAT THE ROMANS (AND CYRUS AND OTHERS) ACHIEVED THROUGH ARMS.

Today's establishment, by contrast, takes the eternal benefits of continued globalization for granted. Unable to convince the public of these benefits, however, many U.S. leaders and pundits have resorted instead to clichés—for instance, appeals to "collective security" to describe an alliance that rarely acts collectively and that can't or won't secure its southern and eastern borders—that are more catechism than argument.

From this follows a subtler point that is no less integral to the Trump Doctrine: Times change, and policy must change with it. U.S. pundits and policymakers remain besotted with the post-World War II "Present at the Creation" era—perhaps because setting the table for victory in the Cold War was the last time they got something really big right across the board.

It's true that during the postwar era, Washington achieved many things of great benefit to the United States and other countries. But that was decades ago, and it doesn't offer a realistic way forward today. We can't just copy what Harry Truman, Dean Acheson, and George Kennan did. Nor can we go on trying to extend their efforts, as if they offer the solution to every contemporary problem.

Hence the second pillar of the Trump Doctrine is that liberal internationalism—despite its very real achievements in the postwar era—is now well past the point of diminishing returns. Globalism and transnationalism impose their highest costs on established powers (namely the United States) and award the greatest benefits to rising powers seeking to contest U.S. influence and leadership. Washington's failure to understand this truth has incurred immense costs: dumb wars to spread the liberal internationalist gospel to soil where it won't grow or at least hasn't yet; military campaigns that the United States can't even end, much less win; the loss of prestige and influence; and closed factories and declining wages.

Trump is trying to correct course, not tear everything down, as his critics allege. He sees that the current path no longer works for the American people and hasn't for a while. So he insists that NATO pay its fair share and be relevant and that allies actually behave like allies or risk losing that status. He's determined to end free rides, on security guarantees and trade deals alike, and to challenge the blatant hypocrisy of those, such as China, that join the liberal international order only to undermine it from within.

The third pillar of the Trump Doctrine is consistency—not for its own sake but for the sake of the U.S. national interest. Unlike several of the world's other leading powers—China, for example, but also Germany, which treats the EU as a front organization and the euro as a super-mark—

Trump does not seek to practice "globalism for thee but not for me." On the contrary, his foreign policy can be characterized as nationalism for all. Standing up for one's own, Trump insists, is the surest way to secure it.

For too long, U.S. foreign policy has aimed to do the opposite. Washington has encouraged its friends and allies to cede their sovereign decision-making authority, often to anti-American transnational bodies such as the EU and, increasingly, the World Trade Organization. This is another carryover from the Present at the Creation era. Back in the late 1940s, it made sense to push Europe—especially Germany and France—to reconcile, especially in the face of a common Soviet threat. But that push stopped paying dividends a long time ago. Yet Washington keeps pushing.

Look at how the U.S. foreign-policy establishment lambasts Poland and Hungary for standing up for themselves at the same time that it warns that Russia today has become as great a threat as it was during the Cold War. Supposing that claim is true (a dubious proposition), wouldn't it then make sense for the United States to encourage a strong Eastern Europe, with strong countries—including Poland and Hungary—to act as a bulwark against Russian revisionism? It's not clear how browbeating these countries to submit to Brussels accomplishes that aim.

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Some Trump critics insist that "nationalism for all" is a bad principle because it encourages or excuses selfishness by U.S. adversaries. But those countries are going to act that way regardless. By declining to stand up for the United States, all Washington does is weaken itself and its friends at the expense of its adversaries, when it should be seeking to strengthen the power and independence of America and its allies instead.

Fortunately, Asia as yet has no supranational superbureaucracies on the scale of the EU. In Asia, therefore, the Trump administration has a freer rein

to pursue its nationalist interests, precisely by working in concert with other countries pursuing theirs. To return briefly to Trump's Vietnam speech, his invocation of that nation's heroic past was not simple pandering. It served as a reminder that a strong Vietnam is the surest protection, for the Vietnamese and for the United States, against a revanchist China.

This idea points to the final pillar of the Trump Doctrine: that it is not in U.S. interests to homogenize the world. Doing so weakens states whose strength is needed to defend our common interests.

As the quote from Hazony above makes clear, we've all been indoctrinated in the alleged dangers of nationalism. But few people today dare ask about the dangers of a lack of nationalism. Yet those dangers are manifold: Nationalism saved France in 1914, and the lack of it doomed the country in 1940. It's unclear, moreover, how standing and fighting for one's own in a just cause is anything but noble.

Beyond all this, globalism makes the world less rich, less interesting, and more boring. In the lecture he wrote after receiving the 1970 Nobel Prize in literature, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn argued:

> In recent times, it has been fashionable to talk of the leveling of countries, of the disappearance of different races in the melting pot of contemporary civilization. I do not agree with this opinion. … Nations are the wealth of mankind, its collective personalities; the very least of them wears its own special colors and bears within itself a special facet of divine intention.

These words, written almost 50 years ago, are more relevant today than ever. Solzhenitsyn was talking about another empire, which had subsumed many nations and was trying to brainwash them out of existence. These captive nations are now free, thanks in part to him, and many of them stand on the front lines, ready and eager to defend not just themselves but all nations and the very principle of the nation itself.

As the Solzhenitsyn quote makes clear, Trump's foreign policy is fundamentally a return to normalcy. What we had before couldn't go on. It is too generous to say it was going to end in disaster: It had already produced disaster. Getting back to some semblance of normal is necessary, good, and inevitable. Anything that can't go on forever won't. The only question is how it ends: with a hard crash or soft landing? For the establishment, Brexit and Trump and all the rest may feel like the former, but they're really the latter—a normal response by beleaguered peoples who have been pushed too far. Trump is simply putting U.S. foreign policy back on a path that accords with nature. Nature long ago snatched the pitchfork from our hands and has been using it to stab us in the behind ever since. Wouldn't you like to be able to sit down comfortably once again?

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