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Trump's Zero Sum Foreign Policy

By Matt A. Mayer

President Donald J. Trump wasted no time in letting the world know that the next four years would represent a rapture from the last seventy years of American foreign policy. In his [Inaugural Address](#), President Trump bluntly stated his goal that “[f]rom this moment on, it’s going to be only America first.”

Under a Trump Administration, “Every decision on trade, on taxes, on immigration, on foreign affairs, will be made to benefit American workers and American families.” President Trump threw aside any semblance of diplomacy by stating that globalization meant little more than competitors “making our products, stealing our companies, and destroying our jobs.”

In what may have been the most powerful part of his speech for Americans who voted for him, President Trump lamented:

For many decades, we’ve enriched foreign industry at the expense of American industry; subsidized the armies of other countries while allowing for the very sad depletion of our military; we’ve defended other nation’s borders while refusing to defend our own; and spent trillions of dollars overseas while America’s infrastructure has fallen into disrepair and decay.

We’ve made other countries rich while the wealth, strength, and confidence of our country has disappeared over the horizon. One by one, the factories shuttered and left our shores, with not even a thought about the millions upon millions of American workers left behind. The wealth of our middle class has been ripped from their homes and then redistributed across the entire world.

This passage is an explicit indictment of global trade agreements, NATO, nation building, and offshoring. If anyone doubted his suspicion of and opposition to the modern world order, those doubts should be firmly eliminated after Friday’s speech.

In a reflection of his Hobbesian view of the world, President Trump noted that although America would look for allies, it would do so knowing that “it is the right of all nations to put their own interests first.” This zero-sum approach to foreign policy means that President Trump will operate within the framework I [articulated last Monday](#) in a speech in Amsterdam.

In my remarks, I outlined four elements of a Trumpian foreign policy. The first element is keeping America on permanent offense and our opponents on defense by shaping the environment and framing the debate of each encounter with foreign governments. As I noted, “whether through a strategically timed event or a seemingly ill-timed tweet, Trump is a master at dictating what we are talking about.”

This aggressive engagement will set the stage for hard-nosed

negotiations. As a master negotiator who cut his teeth in the cutthroat streets of New York City, President Trump “knows he won’t always get what he wants, but he knows not to negotiate against himself by giving up territory out of the gate.” This element explains why he won’t be bound by existing agreements or doctrines, as he wants to stretch the field of play as broadly as possible. Everything is on the table for negotiating new deals which will be more beneficial to America.

The third element of a Trumpian foreign policy is inherent unpredictability. President Trump wants to keep everyone off-balance so he can exploit areas for arbitrage. As I noted:

Does Trump believe in the value of NATO? It depends. At the current cost to the U.S. when other members fail to pay their fair share, perhaps not, but maybe once all members meet their financial obligations. Will Trump recognize Taiwan’s independence? Probably not, but making the Chinese nervous that he might could help Trump secure a better trade deal with China or get China’s help with North Korea. Is Trump being gullible when it comes to Vladimir Putin? He could be, but he knows Russia isn’t an existential threat to the U.S. like the Soviet Union was and he knows he needs Putin to help keep a lid on the Middle East, especially with Iran.

Don’t be mistaken, there is a method in his seeming madness. For those hoping for his impeachment or failure, as I warned, “the road from June 2015 to today is littered with politicians, pundits and prognosticators who dismissed him as a simpleton way in over his head.” With total control of Congress for the next two years, Democrats largely will be powerless to stop him.

The final element is getting a return on America’s investment (ROI). President Trump intimately understands that a good businessman wins more than he loses. His goal over the next four years will be to dramatically increase the ROI for Americans on foreign trade and security engagements. It also will include undermining institutions like the European Union and United Nations that historically have tried to undercut U.S. interests.

In an echo of President Ronald Reagan’s “city on a hill”, President Trump declared that “we do not seek to impose our way of life on anyone, but rather to let it shine as an example for everyone to follow.” America will not lead from behind nor will it bleed from in front. Through strength and unequivocal patriotism, it will once again serve as the bright light of freedom for the world’s masses who share our values.

At its core, President Trump's inaugural speech was an indictment of the world's elite and political establishment on the left and right who got rich off of the forgotten men and women on Main Street America on whose backs was built and whose dead sons secured the *Pax Americana*.

Whether we like it or not, we're now living in a Trumpian world driven by the four elements of his foreign policy. Get ready for a world reordering unlike anything we've seen since World War II.

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