

Trump Foreign Policy: Regaining America's Respect

by Robert Rabil (May 2016)



Hailed by some and criticized by others, Donald Trump's foreign policy speech at the Center for the National Interest ushered a new mindset and orientation for American foreign policy. Grounded in projecting strength and demanding respect, the policy seeks prosperity at home and stability overseas. Notwithstanding that Washington's elites and mainstream media have already criticized Trump's foreign policy, it is undoubtedly a serious foreign policy orientation that needs to be debated and taken very seriously.

Trump's executive and business-like approach was palpable in the way he laid the ground for developing the orientation of his foreign policy. He aptly underscored the weaknesses of Washington's foreign policy continuum, which he traced to the end of the Cold War, and used them as a backdrop against which he formulated his main objectives to restore American strength, respect, prosperity, as well as global peace.

Though Trump's policy needs some refinement, it stands in sharp contrast to Washington's foreign policy since the end of the Cold War. While some criticized what they called its paradoxes, Trump's foreign policy set in sharp relief the state of a great nation torn by ideological convictions, arrogance, partisan politics, and unintended failure to understand the multiplicity of cultural and socio-political gradations of a stratified world. In fact, since Samuel Huntington's hypothesis that following the Cold War a clash of civilizations would dominate global politics, American foreign policy establishment has been unable to come up with a vision nuanced enough to negate the broad outlook of Huntington's hypothesis without conceding the fact that fundamentalist and/or totalitarian groups have aspired for clashes as part of their ideological or practical approach to politics.

The first Bush administration tried to uphold a new world order broadly defined by the collapse of the Soviet Union and Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. It extracted

Iraq from Kuwait but failed to protect the Shi'a of Iraq when they tried to claim the new world order's cherished pillar of freedom from the clasp of a totalitarian regime. The Clinton administration pursued peace between Arabs and Israelis with gusto without breaking the psychological, ideological, or militant barriers to peace. Peace negotiations became a cornerstone of American foreign diplomacy, while at the same time radical ideologies spread alongside bullets and missiles across nationalities. Then American foreign policy was defined by the horror of the September 11 terror attacks. Al-Qaeda, embracing the radical ideology of Salafi-jihadism, carried out the horrific terror act as a means to sow anarchy and project potency to a Sunni world mired in crisis. The Bush administration underlined an axis of evil and called on the world to be with "us" or with the "terrorists." Then it set out seeking vengeance and the creation of a new world order reflected in the mirror of Western universal values. Washington superbly destroyed a regional order but disastrously failed in creating a new order. Taken aback by what it considered the arrogant use of power and shocked by the humanitarian and financial cost of the wars, the Obama administration wrapped its foreign policy in the cloak of the security of retreat. Meanwhile, the ideology of radical Islam, especially Salafism in all its variants, swept the Muslim wetlands of grievances with the promise of victory over humiliation, and an order immersed in sacred history over a subdued, oppressive order. This is the womb out of which ISIS was born. An ideological birth that developed in response to and as a growth of a Muslim world in crisis.

Significantly, throughout the period since the end of the Cold War American foreign policy oscillated between realism, liberal internationalism, and isolationism. And with every shift came intended and unintended consequences for United States' relationships with its allies and enemies alike. More specifically, what really affected American foreign policy has been its recurrent normative rigidity in pursuing its objectives without reconciling its political outlook with either its resources or the harsh and grey realities of the world in general and the Middle East in particular. The corollary entailed an incoherent foreign policy regardless of the foreign policy school. Trump's foreign policy has the potential of remedying this flaw by offering a sensible hybrid of realism and pragmatism. This is how I interpreted Trump's assertion of moving away from nation-building and pursuing a foreign policy based upon American interests and the shared interest of our allies. In other words,

grounded in realism and pragmatism, the policy aspires for constructive engagement on the basis of strength and mutual respect. Moreover, the way by which the presidential candidate structured his foreign policy only reinforces its coherence.

After citing American weaknesses, Trump's policy focused on specific goals relative to Washington's national security interest and those of its allies. The focus on containing the spread of radical Islam is aptly at the heart of American foreign policy. Whereas the Obama and previous administrations have battled Islamic terrorism and/or extremism, Trump's policy has clearly contextualized its plan to halt the spread and reach of radical Islam in military and ideological terms. The policy does not equivocate on designating radical Islam by its appellation or shy from taking Washington's Muslim allies to task in fending off the most serious threat to their societies. Surely, ISIS is a major threat to the U.S. and its allies. Therefore, Trump's cogent plan to try to cooperate with Russia to defeat ISIS should be taken seriously. In fact, United States shares with Russia two common interests in the Middle East: Defeating ISIS and cooperating with Israel. This should not be construed as taking place at the expense of Washington's alliances in the Middle East or in Europe, if only because containing radical Islam is a central pivot of American foreign policy. At the same time, this does not mean that cooperating with Russia in fighting radical Islam will exonerate Moscow from compromising European's national security.

Similarly, Trump's policy mentioned the dire state of Christians in the Middle East and the little, if any, support they got from the West. Being an item on a foreign policy agenda, Trump's policy reversed, at least in principle, a seriously flawed policy embraced by the West for decades. The West has been complicit directly or indirectly in allowing radical Islam or regimes to persecute Christians. The West has mistakenly embraced the mantra of Arab nationalists that all Arab-speaking minorities in the Middle East are Arabs. Therefore, they forfeited their historical roles as protector of minorities in the Middle East in the interest of not disrupting Arab-Western relations. This has proved disastrous for Christians and other minorities.

Trump's policy then focuses on rebuilding the military and the economy. The policy was clear in emphasizing the depletion of the country's military force, in sharp contrast to the expansion of Russian and Chinese military capabilities.

Significantly, in as much as the policy underscored the importance of maintaining American military superiority, it paid attention to spending and saving money wisely. Given that the presidential candidate is beholden to no special interest, coupling wise spending and saving with rebuilding the military is fittingly appropriate.

By perusing Trump's foreign policy speech I could not help but think of Alexander Hamilton's speech to the Federal Convention on June 29, 1787:

It had been said that respectability in the eyes of foreign nations was not the object at which we aimed; that the proper object of republican Government was domestic tranquility and happiness. This was an ideal distinction. No government could give us tranquility and happiness at home, which did not possess sufficient stability and strength to make us respectable abroad.

One could see some parallels between the challenges United States faced then and now; and what Hamilton said decades ago ring true in what Trump is saying today: Making America great is to make America respected abroad!

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