

Appeals and Constraints of Trump's “America First”

Shen Yamei

By declaring “From this day forward, a new vision will govern our land. From this day forward, it’s going to be only America first”¹ and making “America First” the core principle for governance and foreign policy, the US President Donald Trump has abandoned the “globalism” cherished by successive American administrations in the post-war era. Although the “Trump Doctrine” is not yet clearly defined as an overall diplomatic strategy, “America First” has already constituted the most critical element in this strategy, representing a change in direction for the US foreign policy. The distinctive prioritization of Trump’s foreign policy will have a tremendous impact on the US itself and on its external environment with effects to be revealed as time goes by.

Connotation of “America First”

“America First” dates back to the nationalist and protectionist movement in the 1930s. From 1940 to 1941, the isolationists once opposed the US involvement in the World War II under the slogan of “America First.” The slogan disappeared when the US was actually involved in WWII and became a global hegemonic power with a policy of active interventionism in the post-war era. Today, President Trump has picked up this phrase and

Shen Yamei is Associate Research Fellow at the Department for American Studies, China Institute of International Studies (CIIS).

1 “The Inaugural Address,” The White House, January 20, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/the-inaugural-address>.

given it a new connotation.

Domestic affairs comes first

Trump takes “America First” as the principle for realizing the goal of “Make America Great Again.” He tries to show that all his ideas and actions proceed from a desire to protect American national interests. In his speech during the Republican presidential primaries, he said, “(American First) means on foreign policy we will never enter into any kind conflict unless it makes us safer as a nation On trade, America First means the American worker will have his or her job protected from unfair foreign competition On energy policy, America First means opening up America’s great potential to bring wealth and prosperity to our own workers On economic policy, America First means having tax and regulatory policies that keep jobs and wealth in the United States On immigration policy, America First means protecting the jobs, wages and security of American workers.”² During his first year in office, Trump has experienced an obvious “learning curve” in his pursuit of foreign policy, moving gradually from election rhetoric to real politics. Some subversive proposals, such as reshaping the US alliance system and repairing US-Russia relations, have been challenged by reality and gradually faded into mediocrity. However, what remains unchanged is his steadfast pursuit of “America First,” since it is the political basis for his attacks on “elite politics,” overturn of “political correctness” and efforts to shape himself as a savior of the working class.

In Trump’s opinion, his predecessors have missed one important thing, that the United States is still confronted with hostile rivals even when the Cold War has ended. The current world is weak, divided, and in danger. The political, business and media elites in the “Washington swamp” that he once vowed to drain, are more familiar with their foreign counterparts than their domestic constituents, benefitting themselves at the expense of the common man. Given this, he would launch a political revolution against globalism to

² “Presidential Candidate Donald Trump Primary Night Speech,” June 7, 2016, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?410729-1/donald-trump-delivers-primary-night-remarks>.

maximize the US interests and establish new rules of trading with the world. “America First” means that his government’s priorities are domestic concerns rather than aid to developing countries, or regime change in faraway Iraq and Libya, and the government will no longer sit idly by watching American workers being left behind in the global economy.

Not “isolationism”

In his inaugural speech, Trump said, “... it is the right of all nations to put their own interests first. 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.”³ Whether to “shine” in the world by example or by force has long been a measure for judging whether the US pursues isolation or intervention. From his remarks, an evident trend can be seen that Trump is taking his electorate back to an “American fortress.” Trump is also the first US president to challenge the post-war international system which the United States helped create. He believes that the US has been taken hostage by the international order, that the alliance is a burden, and that multilateral agreements have hampered Washington in its actions. And he also questions the necessity of maintaining a US military presence all over the world, seeking to relieve the US from what he sees as excessive burden of global affairs.

In response to the concerns worldwide that the US would turn to isolationism under the Trump administration, in June 2017, then National Security Advisor H. R. McMaster and then Director of the National Economic Council Gary Cohn wrote an article in the *Wall Street Journal*, where they clarified that “America First” is not “America Alone.”⁴ Specifically, “America First” puts the security of US citizens first, and thus the US encourages other countries to step up their strikes against terrorist groups. The US economic prosperity is a critical interest under “America First,” and therefore the US would strongly oppose any unfair trade practices. Another vital interest of

3 “The Inaugural Address.”

4 H. R. McMaster and Gary D. Cohn, “America First Doesn’t Mean America Alone,” *The Wall Street Journal*, June 1, 2017, A.11.

“America First” lies in the solid alliance system and the prosperity of US global partners. In addition, the article explained Trump’s new outlook: “the world is not a ‘global community’ but an arena where nations, nongovernmental actors and businesses engage and compete for advantage.”⁵ It can be said that seeing the world as a hostile jungle is the essence of Trump’s worldview,⁶ under which concept he turned his debut speech at the UN in September the same year into a war threat and mobilization.⁷ In practice, his decisions on intensified offence against ISIS and tough military response to the chemical weapons incident in Syria, as well as air strike in Afghanistan with the “Mother of All Bombs,” all demonstrated the capacity and will of a resolute American power, and partially alleviated the external concerns that the US is abandoning its global leadership.

No allies in front of trade

Trump is the first American president who recognizes the relative decline of the US in overall national strength. He believes that globalism and multilateralism have gone too far and that many countries in the world are taking advantage of the US in trade. Trade agreements over the past decades are riddled with concessions made to trade partners by feeble negotiators.⁸ In the area of foreign trade, “America First” means above all to change the situation in which other countries gain while the US loses. Since Trump rejected globalization as completely negative and established an erroneous anti-globalization ideology, he has solemnly declared “the end to the policy of economic surrender.” Washington will no longer tolerate “economic aggression” and the US will work to establish trade relationships based on fairness and equality. Trump has vowed to “use all possible leverage to encourage other countries to give US producers fair, reciprocal access to their markets” and address “unfair trade practices” like currency manipulation,

5 H. R. McMaster and Gary D. Cohn, “America First Doesn’t Mean America Alone.”

6 Edward Luce, “The New World Disorder,” *Financial Times*, June 24, 2017, p.18.

7 “Warmongers and Peacemakers at the U.N.,” *The New York Times*, September 19, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/19/opinion/editorials/trump-un-address-north-korea.html>.

8 The White House, *Economic Report of the President*, February 2017, p.7, https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/ERP_2018_Final-FINAL.pdf.



EU Trade Commissioner Cecilia Malmström addresses a press conference on the US tariffs on steel and aluminum affecting the EU at the European Commission headquarters in Brussels, June 1, 2018. She warned that “the door to trade negotiations with the US is closed for the moment” and that the EU would hit back with “countermeasures.”

government subsidies and theft of intellectual property. In addition, the US will strengthen reviews on foreign investment, launch multiple anti-dumping and countervailing investigations, and re-negotiate previously agreed trade arrangements. All these have shown the American psychology of curtailing further losses and striving for compensation in trade, even if the actions might hurt the interests of its allies.

Trump withdrew from the Trans-Pacific Partnership in the first days of his office, even though it would deal a heavy blow on the US diplomatic reputation and produce complicated geopolitical and economic implications. He pushed for re-negotiation of the North American Free Trade Agreement and spelled out harsh terms for Canada and Mexico, resulting in little progress so far. In recent months, Trump has also launched a trade war with the European Union and Canada on steel and aluminum, discarding the

dispute settlement mechanism of the World Trade Organization. On a series of multilateral occasions including the G7 summit, the G20 summit and the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) working meetings over the past year, the Trump administration has focused on trade fairness and readjustment, and involved in disputes with its allies. Apparently trade disputes and frictions, the actions are actually a competition of economic power, and represent another round of the US strategic design on global trade rules and trade system to serve its own interests.

Return to great-power competition

The United States has always kept a close eye on its major competitors. Previous American administrations, while putting stress on anti-terrorism, have made the rise of Russia and China as an important strategic issue that requires the US to address. They tried to “reset” US-Russia relations and defined China as a “responsible stakeholder,” and adopted a dual tactic of engagement and precaution. By “assimilating” and “managing” Russia and China, the US has attempted to reduce the possibility that the two powers would challenge the US hegemony after their rise.

What is different of Trump’s strategy is his open declaration to address global challenges in a confrontational manner. The US National Security Strategy released in December 2017 identified three kinds of threats facing the US, the first of which is “revisionist powers, such as China and Russia, that use technology, propaganda, and coercion to shape a world antithetical to our interests and values.”⁹ As pointed out in the Strategy, “a central continuity in history is the contest for power.” “After being dismissed as a phenomenon of an earlier century, great power competition has returned.” “Geopolitics is the interplay of these contests (over influence) across the globe.”¹⁰ All these expressions are consistent with Trump’s public speeches which stress that the

9 “President Donald J. Trump Announces a National Security Strategy to Advance America’s Interests,” The White House, December 18, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/president-donald-j-trump-announces-national-security-strategy-advance-americas-interests>.

10 The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, December 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905-2.pdf>.

nation state is the primary actor responsible for addressing challenges and that countries are in a constant state of competition. They are regarded as vital elements in Trump's foreign policy theory.

Appeals of “America First”

Trump's diplomacy highlights linkage between “America First” and domestic interests, and it is basically driven by individual issues in a utilitarian and fragmented way. However, the implementation of Trump's foreign policies has been lagging behind due to the slow appointment process of key administrative positions, the lack of adequate manpower for internal coordination and communication, and the frequently confusing information released from the government. Therefore, to observe and study Trump's diplomacy, we should not be limited to rhetoric and text, but should rather focus on specific policy actions. Several appeals of the “America First” principle are evident from the prioritization and choice of new policies.

Domestic votes more important than international applause

Trump was elected to the White House because of voters' dissatisfaction and anger over the status quo. Yet his victory did not ease the voters' mood, and he is faced with greater pressure when running the administration. Judging from public polls, Trump has the lowest approval rating among all presidents during the same period of office, falling from 40% when he was inaugurated to 32% by the end of 2017. To attract voters, Trump has always touched upon domestic concerns when he talks about foreign and defense policies. For example, his emphasis on sovereignty and security is, to a large extent, in response to his basic nationalist appeal, which serves his image of defending national interests and protecting the American people. This is different from the principles of respecting state sovereignty and non-interference in other countries' internal affairs as understood by the international community. However, Trump is in a disadvantageous position in external public opinion. The mainstream media almost criticizes

everything Trump proposes, and usually looks at Trump's governing ability and performance through a negative lens.

In fact, Trump's approval rating among his core voters has remained over 80%. His many policies, including recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, insistence on the payment by Mexico for the border walls and pursuit of a hardline trade policy in compliance with the protectionist mood, have catered to the sentiments of these voters and gained their recognition that he is keeping his campaign promises. However, his supporters form only a part of the general electorate. From a structural point of view, Trump's placement of these partial interests above national interests and commitments to allies determines that the "America First" principle does not take into full account the overall US national interests nor its global interests.

Concrete results more important than universal morality

Trump has no intention to pursue abstract values and order, and has promised not to impose the American way of life on the world. The US State Department has adjusted its responsibilities accordingly. In a speech to the State Department employees in May 2017, then Secretary of State Rex Tillerson stressed that "if we condition too heavily that others adopt these values that we've arrived at over a long history of our own, it really creates obstacles to our ability to advance our national security interests, our economic interests."¹¹ After the State Department's adjustment of its responsibilities, the expenditure for democracy promotion has been cut since the work is no longer a priority.¹² Because Trump pursues a result-oriented diplomacy, the connotation of "national interests" has narrowed, and diplomacy involves more business-like dealings. For example, Trump considers selling American goods and arms to the world as a way to reduce trade deficits. In addition, although both he and his administration consider

11 "Remarks by Secretary of State Rex W. Tillerson," May 3, 2017, <https://www.state.gov/secretary/20172018tillerson/remarks/2017/05/270620.htm>.

12 Pippa Norris, "Trump's Global Democracy Retreat," *The New York Times*, September 7, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/07/opinion/trump-democracy-state-department.html>.

China-US competition as inevitable,¹³ yet for practical and profitable needs, Trump refrained from tangling with China over the sensitive issues of human rights and the South China Sea. Instead it has focused on economic and trade relations with China. Currently, the US not only looks at the trade imbalance with China from an economic standpoint, but also looks at the China-US strategic competitive relationship through a national security perspective, making the securitization trend of bilateral economic relations more significant.

It is important to note that although the Trump administration has stated that it will no longer pursue a value-based foreign policy, the value appeals in the US diplomacy are resident. In the wake of the air strike on Syria in early April 2017, the neo-conservatives, nationalists and liberals all voiced their concerns with Trump, in an attempt to push him to take bigger steps toward intervention. The constantly underlying humanitarian and geopolitical concerns tend to pave the way for Trump to tread again the path of his predecessors, who usually “find a fault in others with a bomb at hand.”

Bilateral deals more important than multilateral agreements

Trump made three overseas tours in 2017, covering the Middle East, Europe and the Asia-Pacific, all featuring long stay, multiple stops but little focus on regional multilateral mechanisms. During his visits, he refrained from publicly reaffirming the joint defense commitment with the NATO allies, Japan and South Korea; on economic issues, he has become a straggler rather than the leader of the multilateral free trade system. Because of his indifference to multilateral diplomacy, Trump did not achieve any substantial progress at the NATO summit in May or the G20 summit in July 2017, and he left the East Asia Summit in November before the conclusion of the meeting. Although he has endured the alliance system and did not break off with his allies over disputes about defense expenditure sharing, Trump has pursued

13 James Mattis, “The United States and Asia-Pacific Security,” IISS Shangri-La Dialogue 2017, June 3, 2017, <https://www.iiss.org/en/events/shangri-la-dialogue/archive/shangri-la-dialogue-2017-4f77/plenary-1-6b79/mattis-8315>.

a radical nationalist, selfish, and hardline diplomatic agenda, refusing to be subject to multilateral systems and favoring business-like bilateral interactions.

As far as regional strategy is concerned, at the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) meeting in Da Nang, Vietnam in November 2017, Trump reiterated his desire to change multilateral and regional trade agreements into bilateral arrangements, declaring that “what we will no longer do is enter into large agreements that tie our hands, surrender our sovereignty, and make meaningful enforcement practically impossible.”¹⁴ Clearly his core concern remains preserving market competition based on bilateral arrangements. Although Trump’s Asia trip as well as the latest US National Security Strategy revived the notion of “a free and open Indo-Pacific region,” the idea lacks specific content and is likely to be a sop to the pro-establishment camp at home and to US allies with their own geopolitical concerns in the region. Despite a recent Australian news report saying that the four Indo-Pacific countries of the US, Japan, Australia and India are engaged in discussions about a substitute strategy targeting China’s Belt and Road Initiative,¹⁵ it is expected that the implementation of the Indo-Pacific idea still rests on enhancing trade relations between the US and the region. On the whole, while the US is deeply suspicious of previous trade agreements, it has been slow to put forward any alternatives to replace the TPP and the NAFTA, and has failed to establish an appropriate institutional framework for the purpose of promoting fair and equal trade, which weakens the credibility of its commitment to international cooperation.

“America First” more important than international order

The American public is generally ambivalent about the US leadership in the world. There is a view that the US should relieve itself of the burden

14 “Remarks by President Trump at APEC CEO Summit, Da Nang, Vietnam,” The White House, November 10, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-apec-ceo-summit-da-nang-vietnam>.

15 “Australia Mulls Rival to China’s ‘Belt and Road’ with US, Japan and India,” *Financial Review*, February 18, 2017, <http://www.afr.com/news/australia-mulls-rival-to-chinas-belt-and-road-with-us-japan-india-20180216-h0w7k5>.

of leading in international affairs, because its leadership role has never gained universal international support, and “new technologies (notably, e-commerce, cyberwarfare) are further redistributing power and influence,” making relevant efforts too costly.¹⁶ Dominated by depression and discontent across the society, Trump’s foreign policy as a whole has adopted a posture of contraction and even “retreat.”¹⁷ Since Trump took office, the US has withdrawn from some newly-formed or non-essential platforms, including the TPP, the Paris Agreement on climate change, the UNESCO, the UN Global Compact on Migration, and most recently the UN Human Rights Council. For the WTO, the World Bank, the IMF, the G20 and other international trade and economic structures, the US has repeatedly asked these organizations or mechanisms to give up their commitment to free trade, reduce loans to middle-income countries and to cut financial support for climate change projects. In a congressional testimony in September 2017, Under Secretary of the Treasury for International Affairs David Malpass revealed that the US would “wind down, scale back, or convert to financial plans based on restraint rather than expansion” the nearly 100 international working groups and organizations it participates in.¹⁸ In November 2017, the US vetoed the appointment of the WTO Appellate Body members, putting the global trade dispute settlement mechanism in great difficulty or even at the edge of being frozen up. At the end of December, the US announced its “historic reduction” of its traditional contribution to the UN budget for 2018-2019 fiscal year, a clear sign of its reluctance to engage in international cooperation and the settlement of global problems.

With regard to regional issues, such as the Middle East, Trump has directly stood by Israel’s side, and his Senior Advisor Jared Kushner, in discussions with Israel and Saudi Arabia, even put forward a peace program

16 Robert Samuelson, “The New World Order, 2017,” *The Washington Post*, January 2, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-new-world-order/2017/01/01/fc54c3e6-ce9d-11e6-a747-d03044780a02_story.html?utm_term=.7ca113e4a755.

17 “America in Retreat,” *The New York Times*, June 4, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/03/opinion/sunday/trump-america-in-retreat.html>.

18 David R. Malpass, “Statement to the Subcommittee on Monetary Policy and Trade House Financial Services Committee,” November 8, 2017, <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/sm0211.aspx>.

which is totally unacceptable to the Palestinians. Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel has in effect indicated America's pullout from the Middle East peace process. In addition, Trump has withdrawn from the Iran nuclear deal, dredging up old issues such as Iran's missile tests, its "support for terrorism" and its "threats to regional stability." He tries to link the Iran nuclear issue to the whole complex of geopolitical contradictions in the region and openly supports Saudi Arabia as a major partner in combating terrorism and counterbalancing Iran. With profound changes taking place in the Middle East political landscape, Trump resumes the worn-out separatist approach of "playing one side against the other," which shakes the US traditional role in preserving the liberal international order.

Constraints of "America First"

The Trump presidency reflects not only the profound changes and institutional difficulties in the US politics, economy and society, but also reveals the shortcomings of his leadership capabilities. Trump is heavily constrained by domestic affairs and seriously distracted by diplomacy, which, to a certain extent, has dulled the initial cutting edge of the "America First" principle.

Chaotic policy formulation

Through his frequent tweets, Trump personally holds high the "pro-Trump" banner, and replaces substantive policy deliberation with the clamor of public opinion, thus leading to insufficient strategic thinking in policy formulation. The "America First" put forward by Trump seeks economic and trade interests but lacks global perspectives, failing to integrate "Make America Great Again" with the US global status and leadership. Since coming to power, Trump's foreign policy has failed to prioritize the three strategic foci of the US, namely Europe, the Middle East and the Asia-Pacific region. In the Asia-Pacific, the administration cannot reach consensus on whether to deal with China's rise first or focus on the North Korean nuclear threats. A large group among the political elites in the US believe that Trump's understanding

of globalization, international trade, climate change and the global system is wrong and totally divorced from reality. Since it is impossible to conduct a meaningful dialogue with him now, they have put their hope for the US to return to the right track in the “post-Trump era.” In addition, Trump’s interest for short-term benefits and preference for interest-group thinking, as well as his reliance on small-group decision-making and tendency to rule by tweets, will not help enhance the efficiency and stability of diplomatic policy-making.

Lack of institutional support

Trump’s governance has to be realized through the bureaucratic system, but he himself is anti-establishment. Therefore, the president and the system are continually at odds, which prevents consistent policy formulation and effective implementation, and undermines the institutional support needed for carrying out policies. The formation of Trump’s team has moved at a glacial pace, with a large number of vacancies for key positions still existing in the White House, the State Department and the Defense Department. In the middle and upper bureaucratic apparatus, there is a serious shortage of personnel and even entire layers of staff. The “small groups” are active but with divided authority, resulting in sudden shifts in decision-making teams and increased uncertainty with regard to policy.

Over the past year, more than ten key officials have left the White House, and there has always been an internal “low-intensity war” in key personnel arrangements. In the State Department, the cuts in expenditure, the institutional restructuring, the abolition of senior posts and the freezing of some appointments have resulted in a serious brain drain, insufficient planning and low morale, exacerbating policy-making difficulties. For example, some key posts such as the Assistant Secretary of State responsible for East Asian affairs and the Ambassador to South Korea have been held in an acting capacity or are entirely vacant over the past year. Therefore, Washington has not had the means of responding appropriately to the repeated nuclear and missile tests of North Korea and the resulting crisis. Again, although the White House wants play its role in the Middle East, it has not appointed ambassadors to key

allies such as Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt and Qatar. Then Secretary of State Rex Tillerson even announced in August 2017 the plan to remove dozens of diplomatic envoys, including the envoys assigned to deal with the Syria crisis and with the Iran nuclear deal. Secretary of State Tillerson's ability is also in question, as his proposals on several important issues such as the North Korean nuclear issue, climate change, Iran nuclear deal, and the diplomatic turbulence in Qatar were all rejected by Trump. In a letter written to Tillerson in November 2017, Republican Senator John McCain warned that the "external global crisis is becoming more complex" while "American diplomatic strength has been weakened from within."¹⁹

Domestic agenda restraints

In the face of a difficult domestic economic transition and political constraints, the Trump administration did not carry out sufficient reforms and make adjustments, but instead put the blame on globalization, aggravating and escalating the domestic turmoil. Under such circumstances, Trump has to rush into action so as to produce some governing achievements and thereby cater to domestic political needs. For example, the US expulsion of Cuban diplomats on the grounds of sonic wave attacks, which caused a setback to the thaw in US-Cuba relations, is largely due to the fact that Cuba is an important domestic political chip for Trump. Similarly, in the face of an escalation in the "Russia-gate" scandal, Trump played up the "Russia threat" in an attempt to create a sense of cohesiveness in American society, exhibiting a tough attitude toward Russia and increasing the US military presence in Central Europe and the Baltic frontier countries, thus forcing the US-Russia relations back into the old geopolitical game. The pro-establishment Republicans have never given up disciplining Trump's decision-making through congressional legislation.²⁰ In August 2017, Congress passed a

19 Gramer Robbie, "Lawmakers Slam Tillerson's Bungled State Department Reforms," *Foreign Policy*, November 15, 2017, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/11/15/lawmakers-slam-tillersons-bungled-state-department-reforms-diplomacy-foreign-service-trump-administration-redesign-congress-corker-cardin>.

20 "Congress Steps Up on Foreign Policy," *The New York Times*, June 22, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/22/opinion/congress-nato-trump.html>.

solid bipartisan bill on sanctions against Russia, which completely squeezed Trump's maneuvering space on Russia-related issues.

In addition, under the system of divided authorities between federal and local governments, while the federal government has a negative attitude toward climate change and international cooperation, state and local governments have played an important role in joint actions since they enjoy a great deal of authority on issues regarding climate change and economic and trade relations. However, one should also be keenly aware of the possibility that Trump would adopt a tougher line on foreign policy in order to alleviate domestic pressures. Especially in areas directly related to America's practical interests, one might even see an increase of reckless actions.

An unyielding yet vulnerable president

Since Trump came to power, all the efforts he has made to boost his authority have suffered setbacks or have backfired. For example, his polemics with mainstream media have boosted media circulation and attracted even greater attention to their coverage. From his dismissal of the FBI Director James Comey to his remarks on the violence in Charlottesville, from his pardon of Arizona sheriff Joe Arpaio, who is suspected of being racist, to his challenging of Robert Mueller, the special counsel investigating Russian interference in the 2016 US election, Trump has received no support from the mainstream media. In fact, Trump's performance is weakening the authority and influence of presidency. At present, both houses of Congress, the Supreme Court and even the executive branch have increasingly come to restrain the president's actions, which makes it difficult for him to advance his political agenda. For example, the federal court once put his travel ban and the transgender military ban on hold. The Senate Foreign Relations Committee held hearings to review presidential authority on nuclear issues and openly discussed their serious concern about Trump's nuclear decision-making capability. In addition, although the accusations against Trump of collusion in the "Russia-gate" scandal and of obstructing justice have not been confirmed due to lack of evidence, the "Russia-gate" investigation has already

restricted Trump to act on behalf of the state in dealing with Russia. Besides, Trump still faces other accusations, such as conflicts of interest, confidants' meddling in politics, and accepting money from foreign governments, all of which constitute "landmines" for his presidency. Some pro-establishment elites are anxious to see Trump step down, hoping to trigger an impeachment against the president through the "Russia-gate" investigation. Some have even considered the removal of Trump from office by invoking Article 25 of the US Constitution. Therefore, any major flaw, once discovered, could develop into a major fight for survival of the Trump presidency.

Impacts of "America First"

The United States will not give up its efforts to maintain global supremacy. However, Trump's pursuit of "America First" will lead to a steady reduction in US foreign involvement, damage America's soft power and allies' confidence, pose an impact to the current world order, and increase the risks of major international crisis.

Demise of American soft power

Since its founding, the United States has sincerely believed that its own path would shine brightly and serve as a model for the destiny of mankind. From mid-19th century onward, the US has practiced the creed that "no other major power has brought to its strategic efforts such deeply felt aspirations for human betterment."²¹ An American scholar also pointed out that "American moralism, and even American hypocrisy, have served a profound purpose, providing a deeply appealing alternative model of what it means to be a great power. That is, after all, the meaning of 'soft power.'"²² In fact, all the efforts regarded by Trump as "burdens," such as setting

21 Henry Kissinger, *World Order*, Penguin Books, 2014, p.288.

22 James Traub, "America Can't Win Big-Power Hardball," *Foreign Policy*, November 16, 2017, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/11/16/america-cant-win-great-power-hardball>.

agendas, formulating plans, mobilizing alliances and promoting cooperation in international affairs, are all “assets” for the US to play a leading role, and important elements in American “soft power.” Trump’s “American First” is not conducive to the long-term economic competitiveness of the US, and will also undermine the credibility of US commitments made to the world. In the view of a considerable number of observers, “abandoning America’s deepest values, eroding international commitments to human rights, and setting off dismay among friends and joy among foes around the globe ... would be the ultimate symbol of the end of American leadership in the world.”²³

In-depth transformation of alliance system

Trump once claimed he would “dismantle” the burden of alliances, and frequently “talked down” the European Union. Over the past year, he has been silent about the common historical values between the US and Europe, and has not issued a single joint statement with the EU leaders. He ignored the opposition of the allies in his decision to withdraw from the Paris Agreement and abandoned the “two-state solution” which has been designed to resolve the Israel-Palestine dispute. What Trump has done has widened the gap between the US and the EU, alienated the allies, and deepened the transatlantic rift. Europe has been on increasing alert toward the US, and European nations are talking about becoming less dependent on the US and moving toward a more independent foreign policy.

At the end of the NATO summit in May 2017, German Chancellor Angela Merkel said, “The times in which we could rely fully on others — they are somewhat over.”²⁴ On June 6, Canadian Foreign Minister Chrystia Freeland elaborated Canada’s foreign policy priorities, saying, “The fact that our friend and ally has come to question the very worth of its mantle of global leadership, puts into sharper focus the need for the rest of us to set our

23 Pippa Norris, “Trump’s Global Democracy Retreat.”

24 “Merkel, after Discordant G-7 Meeting, Is Looking Past Trump,” *The New York Times*, May 28, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/28/world/europe/angela-merkel-trump-alliances-g7-leaders.html>.

own clear and sovereign course.”²⁵ In December the same year, the European Union activated a Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) agreement signed by 25 member states, extending the EU’s authority to the military field. This is the first time the EU countries have taken steps to engage in long-term military cooperation, and make Europe more flexible and more independent from the US with a desire to achieve a higher level of “strategic autonomy.”²⁶ In the same month, Japan and Europe, putting the US aside, reached a free trade agreement, indicating that the two sides, unlike the US, reject the siren song of protectionism. In short, facing the prospect that the *Pax Americana* is fast approaching its demise as the resolve and role of the single superpower of the US to lead is on the decline, the major countries will try to seek new alliances, causing the major-country relationships to enter into a period of dynamic interaction and restructuring.

Impacts on geopolitical pattern and world order

“America First” has created great uncertainty in the world about the United States’ intentions as well as its capabilities, accelerating geopolitical reshuffling in major regions. Trump’s preference to consider unpredictability as his primary asset makes it more difficult to build up mutual trust, engage in global cooperation or commit to concerted solution among countries. Because of uncertainty about US policy and its prospects, major countries in various regions have stepped up diversified investment in their own strategies to ensure the ability to support themselves. They selectively hedge the uncertainty according to nature of different agendas, and embark on a more independent path. In the Middle East, the US position concerning the status of Jerusalem touched the root cause of regional turmoil and triggered a great deal of resentment toward the US in the Islam world, whose negative effects are still present. In the Asia-Pacific region, Washington’s confusing response to the North Korean nuclear issue

25 “Address by Minister Freeland on Canada’s Foreign Policy Priorities,” Government of Canada, June 6, 2017, https://www.canada.ca/en/global-affairs/news/2017/06/address_by_ministerfreelandoncanadasforeignpolicypriorities.html.

26 Stewart Patrick, “How U.S. Allies Are Adapting to ‘America First’,” *Foreign Affairs*, January 23, 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2018-01-23/how-us-allies-are-adapting-america-first>.

exacerbated the sense of insecurity of Japan and South Korea. UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres warned against the danger of “sleepwalking” into war,²⁷ and ASEAN, with an ever-watchful eye on Washington, proposed for the first time that America should play a “constructive role” in the region.²⁸

More importantly, Trump has almost given up the United States’ post-Cold War pursuit of asserting leadership in foreign policy-making, including setting international rules, maintaining world order, promoting values, and integrating regional platforms. Former US Secretary of State John Kerry wrote, “The President who promised ‘America First’ has taken a self-destructive step that puts our nation last This is an unprecedented forfeiture of American leadership which will cost us influence, cost us jobs, and invite other countries to walk away from solving humanity’s most existential crisis.”²⁹ “American First,” which in concept includes an exit from globalism and the principle of “America acting alone,” has seriously undermined the post-war order in which the Western world has always followed the US leadership. The Western countries are now worried that Trump is likely to personally terminate the international system, which was established and painstakingly maintained by the US over the past seven decades, and he might even hand over the world leadership to others.³⁰ In the latest National Security Strategy, the Trump administration did not mention any idea or proposal on the development or reforms of the world order, and did not say anything whether it is ready to provide public goods to the international system it led.³¹ Although Trump’s “exit” strategy is not the root cause for changes in America’s post-war status in the world, such actions, in the absence of effective “brake” worldwide, may

27 “U.N.’s Guterres Warns against ‘Sleepwalking’ into War over North Korea,” *Reuters*, December 14, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-missiles-japan-un/u-n-resolutions-on-north-korea-need-to-be-fully-implemented-guterres-idUSKBN1E80FI>.

28 “Prime Minister Lee: Asia Welcomes US Constructive Role,” *Lianhe Zaobao*, November 13, 2017.

29 “‘America First’ Doesn’t Mean the Same Thing as ‘Global Leadership,’” *Washington Examiner*, June 5, 2017, <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/america-first-doesnt-mean-the-same-thing-as-global-leadership/article/2624950>.

30 Dennis K Berman, “China vs. U.S.: The New Great Game Begins,” *The Wall Street Journal*, January 17, 2017, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/a-new-great-game-has-begun-china-america-europe-are-back-at-the-negotiating-table-1484691091>.

31 Zheng Yongnian, “Trump and an Uncertain World Order,” *Lianhe Zaobao*, December 19, 2017.

bring about complicated and dangerous consequences to the global order.

Conclusion

“America First” was a constant motif of Trump’s diplomacy in his first year of office. It failed to clarify the relationship between the United States and its global leadership, exposing confusion in the Trump administration’s strategic thinking. In a *New York Times* article in February 2017, the US former National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski wrote, “... we would advise the president to give an address that offers a bold statement of his vision, including his determination to provide America’s leadership in the effort to shape a more stable world. This speech should serve as a much-needed reminder that the president of the United States is on watch, is actively engaged and has a sense of historical direction.”³² The connotations and appeals of Trump’s “America First” obviously do not stand up to Brzezinski’s expectations.

In fact, some of Trump’s diplomatic propositions did identify some flaws in American diplomacy, such as his promise to withdraw from commitment to nation building of other countries, proposal to renew and improve old trade arrangements, and request on allies to share more defense responsibilities. To a certain extent, these propositions represent the long-time voice of the American diplomatic community. However, Trump’s “America First” does not help solve the problems; on the contrary, it only worsens the environment and conditions for solving the problems. Whether the Trump administration is a transitional phenomenon, or the related policies will be “corrected” after he steps down, or his presidency essentially shows an irreversible structural change in American society, they are all likely to let the US miss the present opportunity for self-reform. History moves on and times change. In the long run, the biggest loser of Trump’s diplomacy under the banner of “America First” may be the United States itself. 🌐

32 Zbigniew Brzezinski and Paul Wasserman, “Why We Need a Trump Doctrine,” *The New York Times*, February 20, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/20/opinion/why-the-world-needs-a-trump-doctrine.html>.