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Neorealist Trump: A New Grand Strategy?

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Both on the campaign trail and since his election as president, Donald Trump has been attacked repeatedly on the unorthodox nature of his foreign policy proposals.

Democrats aren't the only ones distancing themselves from Trump – most members of the Republican foreign policy establishment have voiced dissent as well. In March 2016, 120 members of the “Republican national security community” published a letter criticizing Trump’s views (<https://warontherocks.com/2016/03/open-letter-on-donald-trump-from-gop-national-security-leaders/>) on foreign policy and security, declaring that they are “united in opposition to a

Trump Presidency.” This was followed in August by a letter from 50 former officials (https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/08/08/us/politics/national-security-letter-trump.html?_r=0) of Republican administrations essentially stating the same. Many of these Republicans also joined the #NeverTrump movement (<https://nevertrump.com/>).

Granted, Trump’s first six weeks in office have justified many of the concerns expressed about him. His administration thus far has functioned just like his campaign—impulsive, chaotic, and full of controversial measures

(<https://www.ft.com/content/c7b3b446-ede0-11e6-ba01-119a44939bb6>). But we must avoid the usual trap of only looking at the surface. We must examine the potential deeper convictions or ideas behind the expected policies of the next four or eight years. Let’s assume the Trump team gets it together and creates a concrete strategy based on some of the president’s statements. What are they going to do?

In spite of all the protestations from mainstream experts and practitioners, Trump’s foreign policy agenda—even though it may differ sharply from recent tradition—is not new, bizarre, or even entirely radical. Many of the same proposals have actually been around in the academic and policy worlds for several years and advocated by the so—called “Neorealists.”

Neorealist scholars Robert Art, Barry Posen, Christopher Layne, Stephen Walt, and John Mearsheimer have designed different proposals for U.S. grand strategy, but they have all called for an end to the liberal interventionist policies of post-Cold War U.S. administrations and proposed some level of scaling down America’s international engagements. Their visions for U.S. grand strategy are called “selective engagement”

(http://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/abs/10.1162/isec.23.3.79?journalCode=isec#.WKEW_hiZO8U) (Art), “restraint”

(<http://www.cornellpress.cornell.edu/book/?>

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) (Posen), and “offshore balancing”

(<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2016-06-13/case-offshore-balancing>) (Layne, Mearsheimer, Walt).

Let’s look at the policies for which Trump campaigned and the elements of the grand strategies that the Neorealists have advocated:

1. Trump has criticized the lack of burden-sharing among U.S. allies in Europe and Asia. All three of the Neorealist visions call for greater burden-sharing by U.S. allies in Europe and Asia.

2. While still a candidate, Trump raised the possibility of withdrawing most U.S. forces from Europe and Asia. Two Neorealist visions (“restraint” and “offshore balancing”) advocate the withdrawal of the bulk of U.S. forces from these regions as well.
3. Trump has pledged to discontinue expanding NATO and in general suggested building a more amicable relationship with Russia. All three Neorealist visions propose similar approaches.
4. President Trump has promised an unrelenting fight against jihadist terrorism and made the struggle against ISIS a central theme. Two Neorealist visions (“restraint” and “selective engagement”) include fighting jihadist terrorism as a primary goal.
5. Most generally, Trump attacked America’s liberal interventionism as unnecessary, costly, and harmful, proposing to end American military “overstretch” and move towards retrenchment. The main target of Neorealist criticism is exactly the liberal interventionist strategy of the post—Cold War U.S., as demonstrated by the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Their central recommendation for a new grand strategy is an end to military overstretch and a more restrained U.S. role in global affairs.

Some of these Neorealist thinkers have expressed optimism that a Trump presidency offers a chance for a break with what they see as the failed direction of the post—Cold War era and for creating a more sensible U.S. grand strategy. During the campaign, Christopher Layne argued for Trump's “America First” approach (<http://nationalinterest.org/feature/hillary-clinton-nuclear-weapons-more-dangerous-trump-18241?page=4>) against Hillary Clinton’s more traditional positions. While John Mearsheimer (<http://nationalinterest.org/feature/donald-trump-should-embrace-realist-foreign-policy-18502>) had reservations about Trump, he said in November that “if he makes the right choices, he could fundamentally alter U.S. foreign policy for the better.” Stephen Walt also said Trump had an opportunity to create a more solid foreign policy, but now says that he has squandered it (<http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/02/03/trump-has-already-blown-it/>) in the first weeks as president. Mearsheimer recently sounded less hopeful about Trump (https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/31/business/economy/trump-and-trade-extreme-tactics-in-search-of-a-point.html?_r=4) a month ago, given his initial confrontational positions toward China, arguing in the New York Times: “One can justify provocative moves if they serve an important strategic goal...It is not clear what purpose these moves are designed to serve.”

(Trump has subsequently reversed his stance on the One China Policy (<http://www.cnn.com/2017/02/09/politics/trump-xi-phone-call/>) in a phone call with Chinese President Xi Jinping.)

But the jury is still out. Neither the Neorealists nor the general public know yet what the Trump administration's foreign policy will look like in any detail—in part because much of it is still evolving, even changing on an almost daily basis.

Whether Trump consolidates his presidency and designs a new and improved U.S. grand strategy remains an open question. But if he decides to focus on the big picture, valuable scholarship by the Neorealists could be a basis for such a grand strategy.

Neorealist ideas promote the major changes Trump described during the campaign, but *without* the impulsiveness of the past weeks and *with* decades of hard thinking and research underpinning a new U.S. grand strategy.

Image "Donald Trump with plane

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