Conservative Internationalism and the Trump Administration?

By Ionut Popescu

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Abstract: This article outlines the principles of a new conservative internationalism for the Trump era, and discusses how well the administration’s actions and words fit this paradigm. In order for Republicans and conservatives to reclaim their reputation as the party of strong national defense and competent foreign policy, current and future policymakers need to blend some traditional principles of conservative internationalist foreign policy with new adaptations required by challenging international security developments on the one hand, and changes in the domestic political views of right-leaning American voters on the other. A year into the Trump administration, there are some signs that the administration is indeed attempting to adjust slightly rather than replace the traditional principles of conservative Republican foreign policy, and therefore the “America First” grand strategy framework might become much more traditional in its actual policy decisions than in some of its rhetoric.

What does it mean to be a conservative internationalist in the age of Donald J. Trump? Is this successful U.S. foreign policy tradition unfortunately out of power these days, as Paul Miller argues in his article, “Conservative Internationalism Out of Power?” Or is the Trump team actually working towards building a conservative internationalist world order, as Henry Nau, the most prominent scholarly advocate of this school of thought, recently contended? Does the answer simply depend on whether the so-called “globalists” win the internal policy fights against the “nationalists?”

When judged by most of its early actions and its major strategy statements, as opposed to the president’s tweets, the Trump administration is attempting to adjust slightly rather than replace the traditional principles of conservative Republican foreign policy. Critically important, is how well the administration manages these key adjustments that will determine largely how successful Trump’s foreign policy legacy will be. Therefore, building on the works of Henry Nau, Colin Dueck, and other scholars in this school of thought, this article will sketch out the contours of a new conservative internationalism for the Trump era and discuss how well the administration’s actions and words fit this paradigm.

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administration needs to blend some traditional principles of conservative internationalist foreign policy with new adaptations required by challenging international security developments on the one hand, and changes in the domestic political views of right-leaning American voters on the other. As Walter Russell Mead framed this desirable synthesis in the language of his traditional schools of U.S. foreign policy, “Theodore Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan revitalized the party of their times by returning the Jacksonian-Hamiltonian coalition that made the grand old party. The future of the Trump administration and the Republican Party largely depends on whether the president and his allies can return to these roots.”1 Almost a year into the Trump administration, there are signs that such a fusion between the two strands of conservatism is taking place, and therefore the president’s “America First” grand strategy framework might become much more traditional in its actual policy decisions than in some of its rhetoric.

**Trump’s Policy Shifts, Emergent Learning, and Conservative Internationalism**

Certainly Donald Trump did not campaign as a doctrinaire conservative internationalist, but he did campaign as a flexible pragmatist willing to consider various views and unafraid to change his mind. As he stated shortly before launching airstrikes in Syria, “I like to think of myself as a very flexible person. I don’t have to have one specific way, and if the world changes, I go the same way, I don’t change. Well, I do change and I am flexible, and I’m proud of that flexibility.”2 And to his credit, since taking office, the president showed a willingness to abandon some of his early views in favor of more traditional foreign policy decisions that would easily fit into a conservative internationalist grand strategic framework.3 Less than a year into his tenure, it is obvious that Trump’s management style relies less on long-term strategic designs and more on improvisation and learning. In the business world, such a leadership style based on emergent strategy is quite common, and unsurprisingly, Trump brought such tendencies with him to the White House.4

President Trump’s actions in two of the most critical decisions a commander-in-chief can make, the use of military force in Syria and the Afghanistan strategy review, exemplify his willingness to move away from previous rhetoric, “learn while in office,” and ultimately to take actions praised by conservative

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