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THE PENINSULA

Understanding Trump's Foreign Policy (and how to deal with it)

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With a possible second Trump Administration less than a year away, it is worth reviewing the roots of Donald Trump's foreign policy and seeing what lessons might be learned from his Presidency. President Trump's approach to foreign affairs was neither unprecedented nor incomprehensible. Its roots are in American history, and its principles are discernible. The Trump Administration even had a term for it, "principled realism."

In April 2016, Donald Trump [said](#) that, if elected, he would "develop a new foreign policy direction for our country, one that replaces randomness with purpose, ideology with strategy, and chaos with peace. It's time to shake the rust off American foreign policy." Years earlier, in a May 1990 [interview](#) with Playboy Magazine, he answered the question, what would President Trump be like? "He would believe very strongly in extreme military strength. He wouldn't trust anyone. He wouldn't trust the Russians; he wouldn't trust our allies; he'd have a huge military arsenal, perfect it, understand it. Part of the problem is that we're defending some of the wealthiest countries in the world for nothing."

This sounds like what author [Colin Dueck](#) defines as "hardline unilateralism," rather than isolationism. It is a school of conservative thought that calls for a muscular response to overseas threats to American interests while steering clear of alliance commitments and interventions in foreign disputes that do not directly involve them.

We have seen this before in American history. Walter Russell Mead describes one foreign policy era as Jacksonian. President Andrew Jackson, a populist, believed that the chief goal of the government should be the security and economic well-being of the American people. To Jackson, this meant increasing exports while discouraging imports; and limiting immigration because he believed it threatened familiar cultures and depressed wages. Jackson opposed intervention in other countries' affairs, but he increased the size of the US Navy and reserved the right to take tough action against non-state actors, which in his day meant pirates. Jackson also insisted on defending the honor of the United States against insults. There was a reason that Donald Trump had a portrait of Andrew Jackson hung in the Oval Office.

For Trump, defending honor is more than a personal foible. In a full-page ad he took out in three newspapers in 1987, he wrote, "We must not let our great country be laughed at anymore. We must not let our people be ripped off anymore. We must make Japan, Saudi Arabia and others pay for the protection we provide as a deterrent to the nuclear threat." Fast forward thirty years to a 2016 Washington Post video compilation of Trump's frequent statements about countries "laughing at us" to see how singularly important this has remained to him. During Donald Trump's time in office, foreign leaders could act dismissively toward US officials without consequence, but not toward Trump himself or toward the United States, which in his mind are coincident. He craves compliments to the point of repeating nice things Vladimir Putin said about him, and he does not forget insults. Trump's world view is that of medieval European kings, who sized each other up before acting. Trump categorizes foreign leaders as "good guys," "bad guys," "friends," or worst of all, as "losers." It is all personal.

Donald Trump's other core belief is that the world is made up of nations which are pitted against internationalist forces which are trying to ensnare them. Listen to his September 2017 speech to the United Nations General Assembly: "There can be no substitute for strong, sovereign, and independent nations, nations that are rooted in their histories and invested in their destinies. Americans will always choose independence and cooperation over global governance, control, and domination. I honor the right of every nation in this room to pursue its own customs, beliefs, and traditions." International commitments and assertions of universal values are antithetical to Donald Trump's foreign policy.

This understanding of Donald Trump's foreign policy, plus experience with his four years in office suggests ways in which South Korea can deal with a second Trump Administration should he win the November election. One bit of good news is that Northeast Asia, being less "burdened" than Europe by regional institutions and obligations, is an amenable environment for Trump's style of exclusively nation-to-nation diplomacy. There will also be a predictable consistency between Donald Trump's and President Biden's view of China as a high-technology adversary. Donald Trump may have little interest in defending Taiwan or in criticizing China's human rights record, and he likely will establish a personal relationship with the authoritarian Xi Jinping, but his insistence on continued US military supremacy and trade surpluses will be the main features of his policy towards China.

Drawing tactical lessons from President Trump's four years in office, Korea should: (1) treat a potential Trump Administration demands as opening bids rather than as final positions; (2) read Trump Administration policy pronouncements as first drafts rather than as final products; (3) not waste time appealing to treaty obligations, shared history, or diplomatic

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norms; (4) feel free to disagree but not to overtly criticize Trump or the United States; and,
(5) take Trump's unconventionality as an invitation to exercise its own creativity, including
making unreasonable demands of its own, thus engaging in the "art of the deal."

The history of American foreign policy suggests that it would be a mistake to assume that there will be a lasting return to a post-war "normal," regardless of the outcome of the 2024 US election. The choice between Joe Biden and Donald Trump represents an imminent fork in the road for international relations, but with or without the potential short-term disruptions of Donald Trump, the United States in coming years likely will remain immersed in an ongoing and consequential debate over the limits and uses of American power. In the long sweep of US history, that has been the norm.

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Return to the Peninsula

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