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The election of Donald Trump as president of the United States and the success of Brexit in the European Union referendum campaign in the United Kingdom are the most prominent examples of the populist disruption of the status quo in international politics. This has led to heightened interest in the phenomenon of populism, both among global media and in academia.¹ In the past, most analysts viewed populism as a domestic phenomenon relevant to voter mobilisation, with a particular focus on its impact on liberal democratic systems, comparisons among populist movements and leaders, and its development in Europe and Latin America.² Populism's impact on foreign policy and national security has garnered relatively little attention, and there has been little crossover between populism studies and adjacent fields such as international relations, security studies and strategic studies, which concentrate on foreign policy.³

Trump has consistently attacked key institutions of liberal democracy, political opponents, the Washington 'swamp' and the media; frequently voiced disdain for multilateralism, international organisations, immigration and 'globalism'; emphasised a transactional view of international relations that prioritises the national interest of the United States; and honed a highly personalised style of political communication, claiming, 'I am the only one that matters'.⁴ He has framed his particular brand of American populism

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by identifying the establishment with systemic economic and political failure, nourishing an antagonistic relationship between elites and ordinary Americans, and exploiting the emotional triggers of fear, anger and resentment. These features of Trump's presidency indicate that nationalist populism is a persistent and distinctive element of his political views, one that is central to his conceptualisation of US foreign policy.⁵

Populism, US foreign policy and public opinion

Populism has been notoriously difficult to define and categorise, with some authors casting it as an essentially contested or fragmented concept.⁶ In fact, Ernesto Laclau has cast the 'vagueness and imprecision' of populism as an 'essential component' of its operation, given the necessity of subsuming a complex social reality of competing political claims and antagonistic relationships under a homogeneous identification of the 'people'.⁷ Thus, populism is not a fixed, coherent and consistent ideological belief system for ordering social relations or initiating political and institutional reform, but rather a flexible political mode that can adapt to particular national contexts, economic grievances and cultural anxieties in the name of reclaiming popular sovereignty. At its core, populism operates as a rhetorical device that separates society into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups: the pure people, and the corrupt elite that has betrayed them.⁸ An idealised community of 'hard-working, God-fearing, patriotic citizens' is represented as the only legitimate source of popular sovereignty, which in turn has its sole legitimate political representation in the figure of the populist leader, party or movement, bypassing the institutional constraints of liberal democracy.⁹ As Jan-Werner Müller has noted, 'Populists claim that they, and they alone, represent the people.'¹⁰

Nationalist populism in particular incorporates a nativist concept of the people as an exclusive ethno-cultural community of shared origin and destiny, separated from both nefarious elites and undesirable outsiders, while exalting the inherent superiority of the heartland, its people and the nation they embody.¹¹ Nativism or 'xenophobic nationalism' has been a hallmark of Trump's populist rhetoric, which has regularly dehumanised immigrants as 'vermin', 'infestation' and 'animals', while designating

immigration from Muslim-majority countries as a national-security threat.¹² Such manipulative, self-serving pronouncements from the political leadership have enjoyed popular confirmation in the form of supporters chanting 'lock her up' in reference to Trump's liberal rival Hillary Clinton and 'build the wall' at his rallies; populist messaging via Twitter and other social media; and the affirmation of populist policy positions in public-opinion polls and, of course, the 2016 presidential election.

Public perceptions that the American political system is unresponsive to the people's legitimate concerns and grievances have increased considerably since the 2008 financial crisis.¹³ According to Trump campaign adviser and former White House chief strategist Steve Bannon, Trump voters were disillusioned by a 'rigged system' that had let them down and primarily served the interests of a privileged few.¹⁴ Partisan polarisation produced an American electorate that was increasingly divided between ideologically opposed camps.¹⁵ Voters were separated by race, gender, level of education and socio-economic status.¹⁶ Republican voters were predominantly white, male and older, with a mid-level education and living in rural or suburban areas, while Democratic voters were ethnically diverse and included more college graduates, urban dwellers and women.¹⁷ Trump's white working-class base manifested intense nativism, mistrust of the federal government, economic pessimism, and hostility to globalisation and immigrants.¹⁸

In particular, 67% of Trump voters considered free-trade agreements bad for the United States, and 69% believed immigrants were a burden on the country because 'they take our jobs, housing and health care'.¹⁹ More than 80% of Republicans supported the construction of a US–Mexico border wall, an issue that became emblematic of Trump's restrictive approach towards immigration and border security. Despite healthy economic growth and low unemployment following the recovery from the 2008 financial crisis, Trump voters apprehended the loss of their societal relevance and cultural hegemony.²⁰ While the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), a main target of Trump's populist rhetoric against 'bad deals', had produced modest effects for most US workers, an important minority had suffered substantial income losses as a result of outsourcing and the decline of manufacturing jobs.²¹ Trump would curry favour with these losers from

globalisation in the 2019 State of the Union address, when he said: 'I have met the men and women of Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Indiana, New Hampshire, and many other states whose dreams were shattered by the signing of NAFTA.'²²

Popular discontent with the status quo opened the space for Trump's populist messaging, which, alongside contempt for the Washington establishment, promised national revival and renewal through economic protectionism, aggressive deregulation, strict anti-immigration measures and a transactional focus on prioritising US interests in international affairs that would 'make America great again'. On specific issues of foreign policy and national security, this rhetoric addressed a long-standing gap between public opinion and the attitudes of a bipartisan elite on American global engagement, from military intervention to free trade.²³

Since at least the end of the Cold War, the US foreign-policy establishment has continuously promoted a strategic vision that legitimated military interventions abroad, supported the United States' unrivalled global supremacy and sought the country's enduring primacy in the international system. In following a grand strategy of liberal hegemony, the US aimed to use its political influence, military power and economic weight to deter potential aggressors, preserve regional stability, foster the global spread of democracy, uphold the international rule of law, and guarantee free trade and open access to the global commons in support of a globalised economy.²⁴ This called for the perpetuation of American global power and an activist US leadership role in support of Western liberalism.²⁵

Data from the Chicago Council on Global Affairs reveals that from 1974 to 2018, between 66% and 70% of Americans supported an active US role in world affairs. Although this level of support was relatively stable over the course of four decades, it also indicates that at least a substantial minority of Americans did not share the view of a foreign-policy elite that nearly unanimously endorsed internationalism and active US leadership in world affairs.²⁶ This discrepancy was confirmed in 2013, when a much-reported Pew Research Center poll showed that 52% of Americans agreed with the statement, 'the United States should mind its own business internationally'.²⁷ This was the highest percentage of popular support since 1964 for

what mainstream media and US foreign-policy experts would describe, somewhat hyperbolically, as dangerous and irresponsible ‘isolationism’. Although backing for that stance declined to 43% in 2016, 70% of Americans polled still demanded a greater focus on domestic issues over foreign policy, and 57% agreed that the US should ‘deal with its own problems and let other countries deal with their problems the best they can’. On the issue of globalisation, 49% of Americans thought that involvement in the global economy was disadvantageous because it lowered wages and cost jobs.²⁸ This again diverged sharply from nearly unanimous elite support for further economic liberalisation. For example, nearly three in four members of the Council on Foreign Relations, the pre-eminent foreign-policy think tank based in New York, thought that American companies’ moving overseas would largely benefit the US economy, while only 23% of the general public agreed.²⁹

In packaging anti-globalism and anti-elitism as the nationalist and populist vision labelled ‘America First’, Trump was able to exploit the long-standing disconnect between elite and public opinion on the appropriate degree of US global engagement, while weaponising protectionism and anti-immigration measures on behalf of mainly white, working-class voters who were more hostile towards globalisation, internationalism and immigration than other Americans.

Framing America First

When Trump first outlined his America First approach in detail in a campaign speech in April 2016, he focused on four core premises involving America’s role and position in world politics: the overextension of US engagement and existing foreign commitments; the necessity for greater burden-sharing with allies and partners; opposition to the Iran nuclear deal, and the need to rebuild trust with Israel and Saudi Arabia; and the restoration of global respect for the United States.³⁰ Trump vowed to get the country ‘out of the nation-building business’ and instead refocus US efforts on counter-terrorism and the defeat of the Islamic State (ISIS). To restore America’s reputation and global influence, its ‘military dominance’ would be rebuilt through increased defence spending to remedy the Obama-era budget sequester; relations with China and Russia would be reframed; and

existing arrangements with US allies and partners, from NAFTA to NATO, would be renegotiated. As Stephen Walt noted, Trump's pronouncements lacked coherence but did imply 'a radically different grand strategy'.³¹

Trump's strategic focus was, on balance, anti-globalist rather than isolationist. In supposedly prioritising the economic interests of the American people, attacking the failures of the foreign-policy establishment, and planting a Manichaeian distinction between his America First approach and the 'false song of globalism', Trump charted a foreign-policy course that directly linked populism and nationalism.³² As he declared in his speech at the UN General Assembly in 2017, he was opposed to liberal internationalism because globalisation, trade liberalisation, multilateralism and international institutions were hurting ordinary Americans:

For too long, the American people were told that mammoth multinational trade deals, unaccountable international tribunals, and powerful global bureaucracies were the best way to promote their success. But as those promises flowed, millions of jobs vanished and thousands of factories disappeared.³³

Trump's world view cast the realm of international relations almost exclusively as one of existential threats, escalating danger and aggressive economic competition – a zero-sum game in which the United States had to compete against all other actors, regardless of whether they were liberal democracies or authoritarian regimes, in order to secure its own survival and prosperity. He added: 'As President of the United States, I will always put America first, just like you, as the leaders of your countries, will always, and should always, put your countries first.'³⁴

Trump implicitly embraced a *realpolitik* perspective on international relations. In his eyes, military and economic power alone determined a state's national security and survival in the international system.³⁵ General H.R. McMaster, his second national security advisor, and Gary Cohn, his first chief economic advisor, would accordingly frame America First in deliberate opposition to a liberal-institutionalist view of international relations as a 'global community', instead depicting the international system as

an 'arena where nations, nongovernmental actors and businesses engage and compete for advantage'.³⁶

America First thus represented a deliberate break with the liberal Wilsonian tradition of US foreign policy, and with a strategic vision of cooperative engagement that sought to realise security and prosperity for the United States primarily in conjunction with US allies and partners and in support of a liberal world order.³⁷ Trump essentially reduced hegemony to American economic and military supremacy, decoupling it from the notion of America as an indispensable power and global defender of freedom and democracy.³⁸ In Trump's rhetoric, the geopolitical narrative of American decline and weakness and his hostility towards liberal internationalism were mutually reinforcing. While he did not completely negate US cooperation and engagement and retreat into true isolationism, his transactional understanding of international affairs measured American foreign-policy successes in terms of direct political gain and economic benefit to the United States rather than any shared commitment to universal values. The promotion of human rights and support for democracy abroad basically ceased to be foreign-policy priorities under the Trump administration.³⁹

Hostility towards the liberal international order and America's role as its leader and primary guarantor, as well as attacks on their associated economic and security costs, were hallmarks of Trump's blend of anti-globalist nationalism and populist anti-elitism.⁴⁰ Politically, this had its clearest manifestations in Trump's withdrawal from several key multilateral agreements that had been considered signature achievements of Barack Obama's cooperative approach to US foreign and security policy. These included the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP); the Paris agreement on climate change; and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) – that is, the Iran nuclear deal.⁴¹ He also pulled the United States out of the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. On trade, Trump focused on confronting China and other US competitors, including Canada, Mexico, Germany and the EU, which had supposedly exploited the 'bad deals' negotiated by Trump's globalist predecessors, relying on populist appeals to legitimate a protectionist course: 'In a Trump administration, we will negotiate trade deals on behalf of American workers – not on behalf of global corporations.'⁴²

Trump subsequently used section 232 of the federal Trade Expansion Act to impose tariffs on imports of steel and aluminium from China, Canada and the EU after a Commerce Department investigation dubiously determined them to be a threat to national security insofar as they degraded America's industrial base.⁴³ Immigration was also framed in a national-security context, and cast mainly as a source of terrorism, violent crime and illegal drugs.⁴⁴ Trump would frequently use exaggerated statistics and misleading statements to lend credence to claims about thousands of potential terrorists and criminals supposedly apprehended at the US border, and retail deceptive anecdotes about violent migrant criminals victimising ordinary Americans,

thereby mobilising nativist resentment in support for his border-security and anti-immigration agenda – in particular, the construction of the border wall.⁴⁵

Immigration was cast as a source of crime

Anti-globalism also informed Trump's publicly stated views on NATO as 'obsolete' and his repeated attacks on NATO member states, Germany in particular, for falling short of the NATO target of spending

2% of GDP on defence.⁴⁶ In Trump's assessment, other countries 'owed' the United States 'vast sums' of money for underspending and neglecting their NATO obligations.⁴⁷ Trump showed appreciation and respect for authoritarian leaders such as North Korean dictator Kim Jong-un, Russian President Vladimir Putin, Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Chinese President Xi Jinping despite their chronically fraught relationships with the United States and, in the cases of China, Russia and North Korea, the strategic threats they posed to the US.⁴⁸

What these leaders and Trump had in common was hostility towards the principles of liberal democracy at home and the rules-based international order abroad. In de-emphasising the global leadership role of the United States, America First was indirectly advancing Russian and Chinese aspirations for a multipolar world order and a return of traditional geopolitics and regional spheres of influence.⁴⁹ Some of Trump's harshest and most persistent criticism was reserved for the leaders of long-standing American allies, including German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Canadian Prime

Minister Justin Trudeau, who sought to defend the existing international system against revisionist challengers, including Trump himself if not the United States overall.⁵⁰ Whereas previous US administrations had merely complained about the imbalance of financial and military commitments within NATO, Trump questioned whether the very existence of the Alliance benefited the United States at all.

At the same time, however, the Pentagon seemed to conduct business largely as usual. The United States continued to support the Alliance in practice, financially reinforcing the European Deterrence Initiative launched during the Obama administration to counter potential Russian aggression in Eastern Europe.⁵¹ Some 14,000 US troops also made up the largest contingent, which included an aircraft-carrier strike group, in *Trident Juncture*, the largest NATO exercise since the end of the Cold War, held in Norway in October 2018.⁵² More than 8,000 US troops continued to be stationed in NATO bases in Eastern Europe on a rotational basis, and a permanent US military installation in Poland was mooted.⁵³ Constrained by perceptions of his excessive cosiness with Putin, Trump also authorised the sale of advanced anti-tank missiles and other lethal military equipment to Ukraine, and refrained from vetoing enhanced sanctions against Russia mandated by Congress in response to Russian aggression in Ukraine and the Kremlin's interference with American elections.⁵⁴ He withheld \$391 million of congressionally approved foreign aid not for geopolitical reasons but rather to extort the Ukrainian government into opening an investigation of his domestic political rival Joe Biden, triggering an impeachment inquiry.

On North Korea's nuclear programme, Trump oscillated between making high-level diplomatic overtures and threatening massive military strikes (including nuclear ones), but generally upheld traditional US opposition to nuclear proliferation.⁵⁵ The Trump administration also reaffirmed security guarantees for Japan and South Korea, and increased military activity in the Asia-Pacific, such as US Navy 'freedom of navigation' exercises, which included dispatches of warships through the Taiwan Strait.⁵⁶

As these examples illustrate, there was an obvious gap between Trump's proclaimed anti-globalist preferences and his administration's actual foreign and security policy. The theoretical America First agenda faced practical

obstacles. Implementing major policy changes across the United States' vast national-security apparatus was inevitably difficult merely from a procedural standpoint, let alone a substantive one, and the operational realities of America's pre-existing military commitments precluded quick and easy pivots.⁵⁷ Trump also encountered resistance from the foreign-policy and national-security inter-agency bureaucracy itself.⁵⁸ With the departure of McMaster, Rex Tillerson as secretary of state and James Mattis as secretary of defense, Trump would fill key national-security positions with conservative nationalists and technocrats more aligned with, or acquiescent to, the America First emphasis on national sovereignty and transactionalism. But Trump has not been able to do anything along the lines of forging a close strategic alignment with Russia, withdrawing from NATO, or even substantially reducing US troop levels in South Korea, Germany or Japan. Radically changing the structural geopolitical reorientation of the United States has remained politically impossible, encountering significant bipartisan resistance from Congress as well as the American public.⁵⁹

The main consequence of Trump's nationalist-populist agenda has been the disdainful perception of its allies and partners that the United States has wilfully abandoned the post-war liberal order that it once led in favour of an insular, self-centred approach to world affairs characterised by the slogan 'America First'.⁶⁰ This is not insignificant. In Merkel's words, the 'times in which we could completely depend on others are, to a certain extent, over'.⁶¹ Public-opinion polls seemed to confirm this assessment, indicating that publics in 25 countries had less confidence in Trump than they did in Putin or Xi, or in liberal stalwarts like Trudeau and Merkel for that matter, while favourability ratings of the United States were much lower under Trump than under Obama. In Germany, only 10% of respondents had confidence in Trump, while three in four thought that the United States during his presidency was doing less to address global problems. Support for Trump was higher among supporters of European populist parties, and majority-positive attitudes towards the United States prevailed in many countries with significant populist movements.⁶²

Trump's repeatedly expressed hostility towards the liberal international order, including disruptive performances at high-profile G7 and

NATO summits, has affected calculations regarding America's strategic direction among US allies and adversaries.⁶³ For example, America First, together with Brexit, would give renewed urgency to an intra-European debate regarding the EU's strategic autonomy in the twenty-first century and the necessity for greater German responsibility for European defence and security.⁶⁴

America's international partners began to hedge as much against the possibility of long-term US retrenchment as against the momentary volatility of US policy under Trump. The evolving assessment was that while the Trump presidency was a symptom, the underlying cause was the United States writ large, whose population and political class were no longer willing or able to underwrite a global Pax Americana. According to this narrative, Trump's nationalist populism was little more than a rhetorical accelerator of a dynamic rooted in deep and pre-existing structural demographic and economic shifts that would render the United States merely first among equals in a post-American world order, rather than the sole global superpower. Now a majority of the American people envisioned a shared global leadership role for their country even if abject nationalism remained a minority position. Accordingly, most Americans would welcome a less hegemonic role for the United States.⁶⁵

America First and the foreign-policy establishment

While America First constituted an external challenge for allies and partners of the United States, Trump also mobilised foreign policy as a domestic issue, framing the liberal internationalist vision of Obama and Hillary Clinton as a 'complete and total disaster' while attacking the wholesale failure of the collective US foreign-policy establishment.⁶⁶ Until Trump was elected, a networked professional elite of national-security officials, members of Congress, think tanks, journalists, pundits and academics had exercised a virtually unchallenged dominance over defining US foreign policy and national security. This yielded a Washington consensus on liberal hegemony, global military primacy and US engagement that continuously reaffirmed America's exceptional and indispensable leadership role in world politics and the near-existential necessity of maintaining American primacy.⁶⁷

The foreign-policy community tended to be wary of any alternative strategic vision of restraint, as many of its prominent members blanched at Obama's reluctance to intervene militarily in Syria and at his proposed cuts to the US defence budget. Obama's defenders – in particular, foreign-policy speechwriter and deputy national security advisor Ben Rhodes – focused on justifying the administration's Syria and Iran policies.⁶⁸ But Trump's attacks were framed in nationalist-populist terms, as overdue opposition to a borderline treasonous globalist cabal that betrayed the ideal of Americanism:

They're all part of the same political establishment. They go to the same restaurants, they attend the same conferences, they have the same friends and connections. They all support the same ideology of globalism that makes them rich while shipping your jobs, your factories, and your wealth to other countries.⁶⁹

In his opposition to US leadership of the liberal international order and questioning of the internationalist dimension of American exceptionalism, Trump posed an unprecedented challenge to the political dominance of the foreign-policy establishment and its advocacy of liberal hegemony.⁷⁰ In turn, that establishment responded vigorously, exceeding the intensity of previous attacks on Obama's 'leading from behind' stance, George W. Bush's overreach in Iraq and the strategic incoherence of Bill Clinton's administration. Republican and Democratic experts attacked Trump for abdicating global leadership and retreating into ill-conceived transactional nationalism.⁷¹ A letter published in the *New York Times* in August 2016, and signed by more than 50 Republican foreign-policy experts and former national-security officials – part of a wider network of conservative 'Never Trumpers' – declared that Trump not only lacked the 'character, values and experience' to be president, but had also placed the 'country's national security and well-being' at risk.⁷²

These critics viewed Trump as a genuine threat to the survival of the US-led liberal world order and the geopolitical cohesion of the West due to his hostility to free trade, US alliances and international cooperation.⁷³ Trump rejoined by outlining 'principled realism' as a foreign-policy strategy

that would 'not be held hostage to the dogmas, discredited ideologies, and so-called experts who have been proven wrong over the years, time and time again' given the failures of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the United States' past inability to prevent rival powers, such as China, and close US allies, such as Germany, from taking advantage of it.⁷⁴ He excoriated the establishment for its dismal track record of 'failed policies and continued losses in war' and its misguided promotion of an activist foreign-policy agenda.⁷⁵

The anti-Trump foreign-policy establishment, of course, did not remain completely intact. Even stubborn neoconservatives such as Elliott Abrams and Zalmay Khalilzad were swayed relatively early in his administration, at least as to specific issues. Over time, with varying degrees of enthusiasm, most Republicans fell in line behind Trump's foreign policy, as evidenced by a largely compliant Senate. America First's intellectual sympathisers comprised a motley group of libertarians, progressives and neo-realists who had never been part of the mainstream, who advocated the retrenchment of US power to varying degrees and who favoured an overall American grand strategy of restraint. Trump's non-interventionist leanings and anti-establishment critique seemed to resonate with realists in particular.⁷⁶ Walt has characterised the US foreign-policy community as 'dysfunctional' and 'disdainful of alternative perspectives'.⁷⁷ But Republican political acquiescence and an overlap of ideas have not translated into anything like an endorsement of America First overall, or realist support for Trump's foreign policy in practice.⁷⁸

Trump's political and personal deficiencies, overall lack of strategic coherence and consistency, poor attention to policy planning and implementation, and, at times, ineffectual White House staff made any evolution of America First into a genuine Trump Doctrine or grand strategy highly doubtful.⁷⁹ Indeed, his protectionist and nativist impulses clashed jarringly with his continued large-scale security commitments to wealthy allies such as Japan, South Korea and European NATO members. America First did not produce a degree of restraint consonant with offshore balancing, let alone isolationism.⁸⁰

The Trump administration has consistently displayed strategic confusion and self-contradiction. Hawkish principals such as John Bolton, Trump's third national security advisor, and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo have

used bellicose rhetoric towards adversaries including North Korea and Iran, while Trump himself made cloying diplomatic overtures to Kim Jong-un and called off airstrikes against Iran planned in retaliation for the downing of a US reconnaissance drone. Furthermore, Trump has frequently turned to seasoned establishment figures to fill key national-security positions, including McMaster as national security advisor, Mattis as secretary of defense, and John Kelly as secretary of homeland security and White House chief of staff. These insiders were seen as the ‘adults in the room’ who would rein in Trump’s nationalist–populist impulses, check the influence of anti-globalist elements in Trump’s circle and guarantee strategic continuity.⁸¹

In re-emphasising American global military primacy and the threat of nuclear-armed rogue regimes, in particular North Korea and Iran, both members of Bush’s ‘axis of evil’, Trump’s 2017 National Security Strategy partially recapitulated the concerns of the Bush administration. Likewise, the Trump administration’s renewed strategic focus on great-power competition with near-peer rivals such as Russia and China in a more competitive international environment was foreshadowed in Obama’s policy of strategically rebalancing US policy from the Middle East to the Asia-Pacific, his 2015 National Security Strategy and, reaching back still further, in the Bush administration’s pre-9/11 concentration on China as a strategic competitor.

If Trump’s ‘principled realism’ counteracted the liberal-institutionalist biases of Obama and the Clintons, his anti-globalism simultaneously drew from an established US foreign-policy strain of Jacksonian unilateralism and military supremacy that was broadly consistent with conservative foreign-policy thinking and practice.⁸² Pompeo and Bolton were foreign-policy hawks, especially in courting military options against Iran, and their overall perspective reflected a preference for unilateralism, the pre-emptive use of military power against perceived threats to US national security and interests, and the perpetuation of the unipolar primacy of the United States both economically and militarily – substantially the factors that drove the US interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq.⁸³ Trump promoted several policies similarly in line with customary neoconservative preferences, such as unyielding support for Israel, increases in defence spending and withdrawing the United States from the UN Human Rights Council.⁸⁴

Yet America First is hardly a perpetuation of neoconservative orthodoxy. It also pushes a declinist storyline of American weakness as a direct result of the foreign-policy establishment's misguided globalism and interventionism in the public sphere that resonated strongly with Republican voters, more than 80% of whom supported Trump's foreign-policy restraint and his promise of an American national revival.⁸⁵ This popular support forced many establishment conservatives to opt for nationalism and unilateralism over the activist promotion of human rights, liberal democracy and free trade.⁸⁶

* * *

For better or worse, America First has challenged the notion that liberal hegemony lacked a legitimate alternative. Two major Democratic candidates for the 2020 presidential election, Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren, have themselves outlined progressive foreign-policy platforms opposing Trump's nationalism, excessive defence spending, overseas military interventions, the continuation of the war in Afghanistan and US support for Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen.⁸⁷ Gallup surveys have revealed that the American electorate in 2019 was almost evenly split between supporters of the neoconservative (21%) and liberal internationalist (27%) variations on American primacy, and supporters of nationalist-populist (9%), diplomatic realist (21%) and isolationist/pacifist (18%) forms of restraint, indicating that there was no longer a 'single, coherent, national strategic vision (if there ever was one) of how the U.S. should face the rest of the world'.⁸⁸ Thus, Trump's nationalist-populist attack on the US foreign-policy establishment has produced the most intense debate on the fundamental principles, normative assumptions and political, economic and military costs and benefits of US foreign policy and American grand strategy since the end of the Cold War.⁸⁹

America First does not spell the end of the liberal international order, but Trump's populist challenge to the establishment has disrupted the political status quo and stimulated foreign-policy debates in both main parties in the United States. They now recognise that restraint cannot simply be

dismissed out of hand as ill-advised isolationism but must be fairly considered as a legitimate strategic alternative. The most consequential political impact of Trump's nationalist-populist rhetoric of America First is therefore ideational.⁹⁰ In questioning the political dominance of the foreign-policy establishment and its strategic dispensation, Trump has opened the door for a potential recalibration of American grand strategy away from the bipartisan consensus on liberal hegemony and towards a closer alignment between elite and public opinion, driven by neither nationalist populism nor post-Cold War primacy.

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Notes

- ¹ See Lawrence Freedman, 'Trump and Brexit', *Survival*, vol. 60, no. 6, December 2018–January 2019, pp. 7–16; Matthijs Rooduijn, 'State of the Field: How to Study Populism and Adjacent Topics? A Plea for Both More and Less Focus', *European Journal of Political Research*, vol. 58, no. 1, February 2018, pp. 362–72; Cristóbal Rovira-Kaltwasser et al. (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Populism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); and 'The New Populism', *Guardian*, 21 May 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/series/the-new-populism>.
- ² See Erik Jones, 'Populism in Europe: What Scholarship Tells Us', *Survival*, vol. 61, no. 4, August–September 2019, pp. 7–30; Carlos de la Torre (ed.), *The Promise and Perils of Populism* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2015); and Caas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism in Europe and the Americas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).
- ³ See Bertjan Verbeek and Andrej Zaslove, 'Populism and Foreign Policy', in Rovira-Kaltwasser et al. (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, pp. 384–405. For some recent exceptions to this rule, see Johannes Plagemann and Sandra Destradi, 'Populism and Foreign Policy: The Case of India', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, vol. 15, no. 2, April 2018, pp. 283–301; and Alexandra Homolar and Ronny Scholz, 'The Power of Trump-speak: Populist Crisis Narratives and Ontological Security', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, vol. 32, no. 3, March 2019, pp. 344–64.
- ⁴ See, for example, Jesse Byrnes, 'Trump on Lack of Nominees: "I Am the Only One that Matters"', *Hill*, 2 November 2017, <https://thehill.com/blogs/blog-briefing-room/news/358573->

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- 5 Kirk A. Hawkins et al. (eds), *The Ideational Approach to Populism: Concept, Theory and Analysis* (London: Routledge, 2019), p. 9; Matthijs Rooduijn, 'The Nucleus of Populism: In Search of the Lowest Common Denominator', *Government and Opposition*, vol. 49, no. 4, October 2014, pp. 573–99; and Rogers Brubaker, 'Why Populism?', *Theory and Society*, vol. 46, no. 5, November 2017, pp. 357–85.
 - 6 See, for example, Ghița Ionescu and Ernest Gellner, *Populism: Its Meanings and National Characteristics* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1969); Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005); and Paul Taggart, *Populism* (Buckingham and Philadelphia, PA: Open University Press, 2000).
 - 7 Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, p. 118.
 - 8 Caas Mudde, 'The Populist Zeitgeist', *Government and Opposition*, vol. 39, no. 4, Autumn 2004, p. 543.
 - 9 Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), p. 288; and Kurt Weyland, 'Clarifying a Contested Concept: Populism in the Study of Latin American Politics', *Comparative Politics*, vol. 3, no. 1, October 2001, pp. 1–22.
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