



Donald Trump's Paths to War

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Ever since it became clear Donald Trump had a shot at winning the presidency, there has been speculation about the type of foreign policy he might bring to the White House with him. Much of this speculation has centered on questions of war and peace. While there has been some—not entirely in jest—concern about how Trump might respond to a mean tweet once he had control of the nuclear codes, commentators like neoconservative columnist Charles Krauthammer, were concerned that the “America First” foreign policy Trump put forth on the campaign trail may foreshadow a greater reticence to use military force.

While the notion that a Trump administration might conceive of America's national interest narrowly and forgo quixotic attempts to spread liberal democracy via military-led regime change is anathema to neoconservatives, it is welcome news in some corners. As discussed here previously, despite most of his policy positions being diametrically opposed to their agenda, some libertarians saw hope in Trump's denigration of nation-building that he would be a less hawkish president than his predecessors. Republican Senator Rand Paul, for example, wants to cement Trump's rejection of neoconservative foreign policy. Paul even voted to confirm Senator Jeff Sessions—whose views on criminal justice are loathed by libertarians and in opposition to the very reform agenda Paul himself has championed—as attorney general. According to some, this was in an effort to stay in the administration's good graces and steer it away from an interventionist agenda.

There is something to the argument that a protest vote by Paul against Sessions would have done little to stop the latter's confirmation, and that Paul's position on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee might have allowed him to prevent the confirmation of a neoconservative like Elliot Abrams for deputy secretary of state. And while Trump **rejected Abrams** himself for speaking out against him during the campaign, the entire discussion elides the fact that Trump has already shown himself to be a hawk.

Regime change for the purpose of spreading liberal democracy is not the only reason a country might go to war, and there is ample evidence of Trump's hawkishness in both in his statements

during the campaign and the advisors he has chosen to staff his administration. Trump pledged to escalate the ongoing military campaign against the Islamic State. He argued that the mistake the United States made in Iraq was not taking the country's oil, saying in his post-inauguration speech at CIA headquarters that there might be another shot to do so. His criticism of the Obama administration's intervention in Libya was that his predecessor did not apply enough military force.

Trump has also surrounded himself with hawkish advisors, including until his resignation, most notably, retired lieutenant general Michael Flynn, but also Steve Bannon of Breitbart News. Both—but Bannon in particular—see an unavoidable conflict between the United States and the Islamic world, while also counseling a more hardline stance toward China. As Emma Ashford of the Cato Institute wrote in a recent essay discussing political scientist Samuel Huntington's controversial "Clash of the Civilizations" thesis and the worldview of the Trump administration:

The president's new Chief Strategist, Stephen Bannon, goes further in arguing that the United States should take an aggressive stance against radical Islam, placing it in the context of historic conflict between civilizations. In one 2014 interview, Bannon noted: "If you look back at the long history of the Judeo-Christian West struggle against Islam, I believe that our forefathers... kept it out of the world, whether it was at Vienna, or Tours, or other places." [xiii] Indeed, Bannon's comments often omit the "radical" modifier, describing Islam itself as a threat darker than fascism and communism. [xiv] Neither Flynn nor Bannon confine their civilizational worldview to the Islamic world. For both, China is viewed as an expansionist threat to the West, particularly in terms of trade.

Presidents with little experience in foreign policy lean heavily on their advisors, particularly on their secretary of state and the national security advisor. If Bannon has President Trump's ear though, then blocking a neoconservative like Abrams from a position at the State Department would make little difference in the administration's relative hawkishness.

Aside from statements and personnel, Donald Trump also fits a certain type of demographic profile of leaders who are less risk averse and more likely to enter into a conflict. Political scientists Joshua Kertzer and Thomas Zeitkoff highlighted some of these factors in a recent blog post:

First, at 70 years old, Trump is the oldest [U.S.] president ever to take office. Research by Michael Horowitz, Rose McDermott, and Allan C. Stam suggests that older leaders, particularly in democracies, are at a heightened risk of initiating, and escalating, conflict. The exact mechanisms behind this relationship are subject to debate, but older leaders may have shorter term horizons, making them more likely to take risks in order to make their mark. Second, although Trump has stated that the military boarding school he attended gave him "more training militarily than a lot of the guys who go into the military," he has no formal military experience. Recent scholarship by Michael Horowitz, Allan Stam, and Cali Ellis suggest that leaders at the highest risk of initiating conflicts are those that have served in the military, but never saw combat, since combat experience makes leaders "more knowledgeable about the risks and consequences" of the use of force.

But there are other reasons to fear the Trump administration might be more war-prone, even if it is not affirmatively seeking it. War, as **Clausewitz famously wrote**, is the continuation of politics with others means. It is political bargaining. While it is tempting to view war as a failure of bargaining—as Americans often do—it is actually the continuation of it through the use of military engagements. President Trump has argued that he will get America “better deals” because as a businessman, he knows how to strike better bargains.

However, there are a number of reasons to suggest that Donald Trump’s approach to bargaining is not only unlikely to be successful, but is also dangerous. For example, Kertzner and Zeitkoff highlight recent research on what makes for a skilled bargainer. Specifically, these qualities include a tendency to think through and carefully consider multiple options, as well as an ability to differentiate between the need to exploit bargaining leverage when holding a strong hand and offer concessions when holding a weak hand. As Ketzner and Zeitkoff write,

Where does Trump fit into this framework? In campaign speeches, Trump promised to put America first in terms of foreign policy, and strongly suggests he sees the world of international relations as zero-sum — if other countries are doing well, America must be losing. This zero-sum worldview, with its focus on relative gains, suggests a proself value orientation. Furthermore, anecdotes from past business associates, biographers, and campaign staffers suggest that Trump makes quick decisions, shies away from deep deliberation, and tends to lump unrelated issues together. His low levels of intellectual curiosity – and preference for following his gut and making spur of the moment decisions – suggests someone low in epistemic motivation.

This limited bargaining ability is coupled with Trump’s off-the-cuff, brash pronouncements—which often leave him in a position where he has to backtrack. Commentators have made much of Trump’s “Jacksonian” tendencies (as previously discussed here as well). As political scientist Daniel Drezner notes, Jacksonian tendencies are tied to notions of honor that demand bellicose rhetoric be backed by action. But Donald Trump has shown little interest in acting honorably. Drezner points out that this could be a good thing, where Trump will feel little need to follow through on his off-the-cuff, hawkish remarks. However, a tendency to continually back down following brash statements will lead others to believe the president is merely bluffing. If Trump is attempting to bargain over an issue on which he has little understanding but wishes to hold firm, the other side might not think they have any reason to believe he will hold firm. Both sides might find themselves then a position where one side, or both, has greater incentive to bargain by employing Clausewitz’s “other means.”