

Forbes

Donald Trump's Contradictory Foreign Policy Vision: Still Better Than His Rivals

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April 28, 2016

Yesterday Donald Trump offered his foreign policy vision. It was the sort of mishmash one might expect, given what he's said on the stump. He seemed to be starting the traditional march toward the center for November, but he is no Neoconservative and broke with pro-war Republican orthodoxy in important ways.

Trump's views suggest the good, the bad and the ugly. Thankfully not as ugly as the positions taken by most of the Republican Party presidential contenders and congressional leaders as well as Democrat Hillary Clinton. Nor as bad as policies implemented by President Barack Obama over the last seven years. But not as good as the provocative thinking of Rand and especially Ron Paul.

The speech, delivered in Washington, D.C., was standard campaign fare, intended to demonstrate that the candidate was serious, or at least knew the names of a couple foreign nations. For Republicans these addresses almost always mean flaunting hawkish views: decrying the exceedingly dangerous state of the world, denouncing the irresponsible Obama administration for withdrawing from that world, demanding a massive increase in military outlays, and promising to bomb at least one and perhaps several dangerous nations or organizations bent on global murder and mayhem.

Unsurprisingly, Trump offered some of the usual bland generalities. For instance, he explained, he would "always put the interest of the American people and American security above all else." Moreover, he sought "to develop a new foreign policy direction for our country, one that replaces randomness with purpose, ideology with strategy, and chaos with peace." Who in U.S. politics advocates placing American interests last and following a policy of chaos?

Still, there was considerable good in the talk.

After the Cold War, he noted, America's foreign policy veered off course: "Logic replaced with foolishness and arrogance, which led to one foreign policy disaster after another." Hard to argue with that, though many Republicans do. Moreover, said Trump, it was a mistake to believe that

the U.S. could impose Western-style democracy on countries “that had no experience or interests” in the process. Things certainly haven’t worked out well in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, or Somalia.

Indeed, he noted that “the legacy of the Obama-Clinton interventions will be weakness, confusion and disarray, a mess. We’ve made the Middle East more unstable and chaotic than ever before. We left Christians subject to intense persecution and even genocide.” It actually is the *Bush*-Obama-Clinton interventions and the region always has been a mess, but point taken. “Our actions in Iraq, Libya and Syria have helped unleash ISIS,” especially the invasion of Iraq by you-know-who. Indeed, Trump added, “After losing thousands of lives and spending trillions of dollars, we are in far worse shape in the Middle East than ever, ever before.” True.

Trump was particularly critical of unnecessary war-making: “unlike other candidates for the presidency, war and aggression will not be my first instinct.” *War and aggression*. Those are words not often spoken by Republican presidential candidates. Moreover, “a superpower understands that caution and restraint are really truly signs of strength.”

Almost alone among the GOP contenders he criticized the Iraq debacle, whose “biggest beneficiary has been Iran.” And which yielded ISIS. Trump even paraphrased John Quincy Adams: “The world must know that we do not go abroad in search of enemies.” That would be a dramatic change from the Clinton-Bush-Obama years.

Unsurprisingly, given how much Washington does around the world, he argued that “our resources are totally over extended.” Trump confused “wasteful spending” and “massive debt” with trade deficits, considering the last to be costs. But the latter result when we give little pieces of paper to foreigners for real goods which they ship to us. That’s actually not a bad deal.

Further, said Trump, “our allies are not paying their fair share.” Thus, he contended, “the whole world will be safer if our allies do their part to support our common defense and security.” This is obviously true. However, the problem is not that they aren’t paying their fair share, but that they aren’t defending themselves. Whatever they want to spend is “fair” so long as they are responsible for their own security.

He promised to get out “of the nation-building business.” That would be a welcome change. But in the same sentence he pledged instead to focus on “creating stability in the world.” Of course, that is one justification for nation-building. Create a stable Afghanistan, Iraq, and Somalia. One reason America shouldn’t nation-build is because stability so rarely is attainable, at least at reasonable cost in lives and money.

After declaring that “we must develop a foreign policy based on American interests,” he made the sensible point that Washington should cooperate with Russia. That doesn’t mean whitewashing Vladimir Putin but recognizing that fighting a mini-Cold War over a problem partly of Washington’s making—spending years dismissing Moscow’s security concerns—is not in America’s interest. And recognizing that the U.S. and Russia have shared interests around the world.

But there was the bad in the talk as well.

Trump correctly observed that America had “spent trillions of dollars over time on planes, missiles, ships, equipment, building up our military to provide a strong defense for Europe and Asia.” Alas, he drew the wrong conclusion: “The countries we are defending must pay for the cost of this defense, and if not, the U.S. must be prepared to let these countries defend themselves.”

Having prosperous, populous allies defend themselves should be the objective, not the punishment. Washington should not hire out its military. And there’s no way other nations can reimburse the U.S. for the blood Americans shed. Foreign peoples should defend their own homelands.

In a speech intended to highlight his unconventional thinking, he spouted the standard but nonsensical Republican claim that “our friends are beginning to think they can’t depend on us.” Does he mean all those nations in Asia, Europe and the Middle East that Washington continues to defend at such high cost?

As an example he cited the “disastrous deal with Iran” without offering an alternative. Yet the agreement has pushed back Tehran’s ability to create nuclear weapons and intensified the internal struggle over Iran’s future. He also complained that the Obama administration had “snubbed and criticized” Israel. However, U.S. officials pointed out the genuinely “disastrous” impact of decades of occupation and intensified settlement construction in the West Bank, which have harmed America as well as Israel. He confused “supporting” that nation’s security with promising its most extreme leaders all that they want, a mistake made by most of the vote-minded Republican contenders.

In promising a “coherent foreign policy” (who ever says they favor incoherence?), he stated: “To our friends and allies ... America is going to be reliable again. It’s going to be a great and reliable ally again.” Which they will interpret as Washington continuing to subsidize their every move and fulfill their every wish.

“Our rivals no longer respect us,” complained Trump. Cuban and Saudi officials didn’t greet the president at the airport. Well, Riyadh is supposed to be an ally: They are upset because President Obama no longer is letting them set U.S. policy, an approach Trump should applaud. The Castros are worried that American influence will grow—because the administration made a long overdue opening which virtually no Republican politician would do. “President Obama watches helplessly as North Korea” continues its nuclear developments, complained Trump. As did Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush. President Trump likely would find himself in the same situation.

Finally, there was more than a little ugly.

No surprise, given the bombast of his campaign proclamations, Trump overestimated Washington’s ability to force other nations to do its will: “We have the power over China, economic power, and people don’t understand it.” Actually, they do, but they also recognize that the relationship runs both ways. Nor does Beijing only depend on America: China dominates commerce in Asia, is playing a bigger role in Africa, and is receiving constant entreaties from Europe.

The present administration did not “allow” Beijing to steal government and industrial secrets: Washington threatened retaliation. Maybe President Trump could do better, but the candidate has yet to demonstrate that he understands the difference between diplomatic and commercial negotiation.

Further, he claimed that with America’s “economic power, we can rein in and we can get them to do what they have to do with North Korea.” The Chinese government acts the way it does toward the North because the former views the consequences of a North Korean collapse, including Korean unification resulting in U.S. troops on its border, as worse than a nuclear North Korea. It would make more sense to use diplomacy, which Trump elsewhere lauds, to address China’s concerns than to threaten to wreck the relationship between the world’s two most important states. After all, Trump as populist tribune should recognize the likely reaction of a proud, nationalistic people whose country only recently escaped centuries of humiliation to an attempt by arrogant foreigners to dictate policy. “Not good,” he might quip.

After criticizing unnecessary wars and subsidies for allies, Trump made the standard claim regarding the Islamic State: “ISIS will be gone if I’m elected president. And they’ll be gone quickly. They will be gone very, very quickly.” Ironically, this is another instance of Washington doing someone else’s job: America’s allies and friends are the countries threatened by ISIS, so they should do the heavy lifting, rather than off-loading it, as always, on Washington.

Moreover, Trump insisted that “we have to rebuild our military.” This is standard GOP rhetoric which cuts against much else that he talked about. Trump complained that President Obama cut outlays—only after greatly increasing them, which Trump did not mention. In fact, even after adjusting for inflation Obama’s cumulative military expenditures will exceed those of his predecessor. America accounts for roughly 40% of the globe’s military outlays, stands far above both China and Russia, neither of which threatens the U.S. militarily, and is allied with every major industrialized power, save the latter two. One reason to allow Washington’s Asian, European, and Middle Eastern friends to finally defend themselves is so the U.S. no longer has to create—and pay for—the expensive, oversize force structure necessary to protect them.

Although America has grown prosperous as a trading nation, free trade continues to be Trump’s bete noire. “We have to find a way quickly, and I mean quickly, to balance” the trade deficit with China. Why? The trade deficit is an accounting fiction. Would he insist on balance where today the U.S. runs a surplus? Should Americans *stop* selling overseas in such cases?

Trump also blamed NAFTA for emptying “our states of our manufacturing and our jobs.” Actually, increasing productivity has resulted in lower manufacturing employment all over the world, and those job losses started well before NAFTA. Surely he does not believe America would be better off if Mexico was poorer. The right strategy, which he touches on elsewhere, is to reform U.S. government economic policies to improve Americans’ competitiveness.

Trump closed his talk with a promise to view “the world through the clear lens of American interests. I will be America’s greatest defender and most loyal champion.” No doubt his competitors would claim the same, but actually doing so would be a useful change. With the bulk of the “defense” budget devoted to protecting other nations, most American lives lost in

attempting to build other countries, and most terrorist attacks growing out of promiscuous meddling in other states' conflicts, a focus on U.S. interests is long overdue.

Of course, those backing a policy of constant war were not impressed with Trump's effort. For instance, Hillary Clinton—who backed war in the Balkans, voted for the Iraq invasion, and was architect of the misbegotten Libya disaster—denounced “the long list of dangerous national security proposals” that Trump had put forth. How they could be worse than her own she left unexplained.

Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.), who never misses a chance to push for military intervention somewhere, complained: “Ronald Reagan must be rolling over in his grave.” Yet Trump's perspective on foreign policy is far closer than Graham's to that of Reagan. The latter used the military only three times and toward modest ends. Reagan recognized that he'd made a mistake entering the Lebanese civil war and pulled out after the suicide bombings rather than launch a multi-year nation-building mission. Moreover, despite his hawkish reputation, Reagan genuinely abhorred the prospect of war, which motivated his cooperation with the Soviet Union's Mikhail Gorbachev and support for missile defense. I knew Ronald Reagan and he was no Neoconservative.

No one knows how President Trump would actually govern. But his foreign policy sounds a lot like his domestic policy: inconsistent, contradictory, ill-formed, incomplete. But still far better than those of his main rivals. If he wins the GOP nomination, for the first time in years the presidential race might yield a genuine debate over foreign policy.

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