



We Asked an Expert What We Actually Know About Donald Trump's Foreign Policy

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On Wednesday, in front of a polite crowd assembled by the Center for National Interest in Washington, DC, presidential candidate Donald Trump gave a speech ostensibly clarifying his foreign policy. Repeatedly promising to "put America first," Trump assured the audience that, under his leadership, the country's approach to national security would at long last be "coherent" and "based upon American interests and the shared interests of our allies."

But virtually no one who watched the speech emerged with a coherent idea of Trump's foreign policy strategy. Outside of a few kind words from the candidate's staunch supporters, and Russian President Vladimir Putin, there hasn't been a lot of praise for the Trump Doctrine this week, with most editorial writers and foreign policy experts dismissing the speech as "rife with contradictions" and predictably lacking in specifics.

The doctrine itself was hard to pick out. In the speech, Trump was at his most detailed when he promised two NATO summits aimed at "rebalancing of financial commitments." But for other claims, like promising he would "look for talented experts with new approaches" when staffing his administration and "develop, build, and purchase the best equipment known to mankind" for the military, details were practically nonexistent. Although maybe whatever the Trump Doctrine is, it's supposed to be vague, since, as Trump himself put it in his speech, "We must as a nation be more unpredictable."

But between the platitudes, there did seem to be signs of an embryonic global strategy. To try to figure out exactly what that strategy might be, we tracked down Doug Bandow, a senior fellow at the libertarian-leaning Cato Institute who specializes in foreign policy and has voiced support for some of Trump's proposals. Our conversation is below, lightly edited for length and clarity.

In the past, you've written pieces that have been supportive of, or at least open to, some of Trump's foreign policy positions. Can you explain what that's about?

I think he has said a lot of intelligent things—not always very nuanced, but conceptually, he's made some very important points on foreign policy. But I don't think the speech laid out the kind of coherent vision he was talking about.

To some degree, I don't expect coherence from him because nothing so far has indicated policy coherence. That's on both domestic and foreign policy. So I don't really expect coherence. It's just that when you announce in your speech "I'm in favor of coherence. I want to give a foreign policy vision," you probably need something more.

The critical thing is, he understands the current system is broken. I think that's the foundation, and he's got that right. The question then is what does he build on top.

You've agreed with Trump's argument that rich allies of the US need to foot the bill for their own defense. Does he mean literally charging allies money for the use of US military defense?

[His] idea that they're gonna pay for it presumably means that [he wants allies to] give us money—and if they don't want to pay, we won't [defend them]. But why do we want to lend out the US military? To me that doesn't make much sense. I think that makes sense as kind of a businessman thinking financially. [But] I think that that doesn't work very well [as a foreign policy approach]. Show up at a NATO summit with your hand out? How is that gonna work?

What I [have] argued is that he's got the order wrong—that if other countries are able to defend themselves, they should do so. If they have to, then they will, and they're gonna pay for it.

Trump criticized President Obama for publicly failing in international talks—he mentioned the US bid for the 2016 Olympics, for example. Can you explain the thinking behind that?

The question is not [whether] you negotiate—it's [whether] you put the president in a high-profile position, advocating for a position where you're gonna look pretty stupid afterward. I had the same reaction on the Asian Development Bank that the Chinese set up: [The US] publicly berated the British because they were joining it, which was, in my view, extraordinarily stupid, because they [the British] just kind of ignored us, and off they went. That's the kind of thing you do privately.

It doesn't mean you don't have negotiations. What it means is, you're much more careful when you take public stands, especially if you put the prestige of the president of the United States on the line. [But] Trump didn't put it that way, and I can't say that's exactly what he meant.

What else do you think is still missing from Trump's foreign policy?

If I'm a China specialist, I have no idea what he actually plans to do. He kind of wants to be tough. He wants to immediately—or very quickly—get rid of the trade deficit. Huh? How on earth do you do that? If I'm a Russia specialist, he didn't tell me exactly what he would do in terms of Crimea. He's backed away from some of the nice things he's said about Putin, but I still get the sense that he would promote rapprochement there, that there would clearly be an initiative.

With North Korea, [he's saying] "our enemies don't respect us," but Bill Clinton and George W. Bush had the same problem. There's no reason that President Trump wouldn't have the same

problem. Give me the answer and how you're going to bring North Korea to heel without starting a war. He didn't.

Conversely, what do you think was the most substantive part of his speech?

One of the most interesting little communications in there was him basically saying "people who supported the Iraq War will not have jobs in my administration." He's made a pretty clear declaration: *Neoconservatives, don't come crawling to me.* I thought that was fascinating because normally what [candidates] want is [for] everyone to clamor onto the bandwagon. He clearly said "don't bother."

With neocons eliminated, do you think that would mean that Trump's administration would end up more libertarian-leaning, at least in terms of foreign policy?

If you're a libertarian who's prepared to work for someone who hates free trade and doesn't like immigrants, and who wants to ban Muslims from America—a lot of stuff that, if you're a libertarian, it would be pretty hard to swallow. [Libertarians] are realists—I wouldn't classify [Trump] as one, but nevertheless, for anyone out there who had doubts about Iraq, finally there's a [candidate] who recognizes that some of these [interventions] don't work out well.

There are some [Republicans] who I can imagine moving his way—the kinds of people who are hawkish and tough, but [who] don't like nation building. The Republican Party is growing more protectionist, so those folks are out there. A lot of those people could very well show up and say, "I don't like what he said about economics, or this-or-that, but I can be for somebody who's tough and pro-American but not likely to get us into a bunch of goofy wars in the Middle East."

You don't have to be a Tea Partier or a libertarian to see that as a positive thing. There are folks who might find that an attractive option.