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Does Trump's Foreign Policy Make Sense?

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It's the season for year-end reviews, and no topic deserves greater attention than Donald Trump's erratic and dangerous foreign policy. Thankfully, John Glaser, Christopher Preble, and Trevor Thrall of the Cato Institute have produced a new book that is just what the doctor ordered. As a bonus, it goes beyond an analysis of this year's fights and follies to the beginning of the Trump administration, and beyond that to the key indicators of Trump's foreign policy views that predate his brief time as Commander-in-Chief.

Unlike some books, the title of Glaser, Preble and Thrall's volume – *Fuel to the Fire: How Trump Made America's Broken Foreign Policy Even Worse (And How We Can Recover)* — gets to the heart of their argument. What it loses in lack of brevity it more than makes up for in clarity—a worthwhile tradeoff, to be sure.

The thrust of the book is a call for a more restrained foreign policy that expects allies to do more in their own defense; takes a more realistic view of the challenges posed by Russia and China, and seeks areas of cooperation rather than promoting confrontation; and abandons the policy of “primacy” that has given global military intervention pride of place in U.S. foreign policy, with disastrous results for U.S. security and huge costs in blood and treasure. It's impossible to do justice to all the arguments in the book here, which is well worth reading for anyone who wants to make sense of our current foreign policy dilemmas. But a few key points stood out for me.

One of the most valuable and unique parts of the book is its extended analysis of what makes Donald Trump tick when it comes to foreign policy decision making. I generally chalk it up to his extreme narcissism and deep insecurity – dangerous qualities in a person who can end life as we know it at a moment's notice. But the Cato volume moves beyond that admittedly oversimplified view to dig deeper into Trump's motivations and how they impact his conduct of U.S. policy.

The book outlines four key components behind Trump's “America First” world view (which could just as easily be characterized as a “Trump First” policy): zero-sum transactionalism; Jacksonian nationalism and militarism; honor, status, and respect; and an authoritarian mindset. I will summarize each in turn, but as with the book as a whole these concepts are best grasped by reading the author's full treatment of them.

Zero-sum transactionalism refers to Trump's tendency to assume that there is only one winner in any transaction, and that virtually every country in the world is “taking advantage of us” in some fashion, be it on trade, or aid, or their political stance on issues of interest to the United States. This drives everything from Trump's love affair with tariffs to his assumption that alliances have little value unless the U.S is literally getting paid for its role in them.

The Jacksonian approach was defined by Walter Russell Mead in his seminal 2001 book on the subject of key historical trends in U.S. foreign policy, and is summarized by the Cato authors as an ideology that stresses “populist values, economic nationalism, and military might.” One might add that Trump’s versions of populism and nationalism have strong racist underpinnings, as evidenced in his hysteria about and demonizing of Mexican immigrants and his selective but nonetheless highly destructive “Muslim ban.” The Jacksonian view sees the world as an “anarchic, violent place” where military might is the main guarantor of security, international cooperation be damned.

Trump’s craving for honor, status and respect goes far in explaining his behavior in general and his foreign policy practices in particular. It shows itself in his constant bragging about his accomplishments, both real and imagined; his weakness for flattery, as when the brutal Saudi regime threw what essentially was a huge, multi-faceted party in his honor when he visited Riyadh in May 2017; and his belief that his America First policy and personal authority are all that stand between America and “one humiliation after another.”

Last, and most concerning, are Trump’s authoritarian tendencies, played out in everything from his definition of the free press as the “enemy of the people” to his practice of ignoring subpoenas from Congress to his penchant for accusing those who disagree with him of treason. Thankfully, the U.S. system provides counterbalancing forces, but we need to use them far more effectively than we have done so far if we are to stave off the worst elements of the Trump agenda, both at home and abroad.

The book ends with a discussion of a more prudent American grand strategy, something that is urgently needed regardless of who occupies the White House in January 2021. In my view, doing so requires an acceptance that American power is declining relative to other players on the world stage, and bulking up the U.S. military and pursuing dominance above all else will only accelerate that decline, rather than earning the United States a place of influence and leverage to help shape a new approach to pressing international problems. A new approach requires more realism about the challenges facing the United States, and an abandonment of the kind of threat inflation that has led us so far astray during this century; a more restrained approach to the use of military force, seeing it as a true last resort; a spirit of cooperation and a commitment to following the same rules we expect of everybody else; and a stronger role for Congress and the public on fundamental issues of war and peace. Glaser, Preble and Thrall’s book makes a valuable contribution to the conversation about U.S. foreign policy, and makes clear that it’s not enough to go back to the purported “good old days” that preceded the Trump presidency.