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“America First”: Neither Cosmopolitan Nor Isolationist

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It is remarkable how often foreign audiences misunderstand American political leaders and voters. As an extreme example, at an academic conference organized by a prominent British university, sophisticated academics in attendance went on about how then-President George W. Bush, given his apparent religious leanings, might find the possibility of a nuclear war acceptable because it would usher in the Apocalypse and the Second Coming in Christian eschatology. Several academics in attendance were fully willing to set aside the complete absurdity of that proposition and discuss it as serious commentary on U.S. leadership.

Perhaps such misunderstandings of U.S. politics should be unsurprising when sophisticated domestic polling organizations and the most prestigious domestic news organizations appear not to understand the American electorate, particularly the “America First” populist movement. For example, just days before the 2024 election, one of the most highly regarded American pollsters announced a three-point advantage for presidential candidate Kamala Harris in the state of Iowa. The actual election result was a 13-point advantage for candidate Trump. This was a breathtaking 16-point error shortly before the election. It remains unclear how a highly experienced domestic polling team could get results so wrong.¹

The problem, of course, is that mistaken perceptions and expectations about America, whether by allies, commentators, or pollsters, can lead to conclusions that otherwise would not be considered reasonable. What may be seen in numerous foreign press reports regarding the



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incoming Trump Administration is a fear that it will pursue an isolationist foreign policy that will end U.S. alliances and close the extended nuclear umbrella for America's allies. For example, a post-election National Public Radio broadcast included a prominent British journalist who said that the existing "...world order, I think, is now fundamentally coming to an end with the reelection of Donald Trump, because Donald Trump doesn't really believe in alliances." The journalist added, "the reelection of Donald Trump probably serves [China's] purpose ... which is that a United States that turns inward and no longer wishes to be, you know, leader of the - a [sic] world order leaves much more room for China to kind of shape the world as it sees fit."² Such predictions understandably alarm allies.

Trump has indeed sharply criticized many wealthy allies for their continuing low level of defense spending in a time of unprecedented security threats to the West. But it should be obvious that the sharpness of Trump's language is part of his negotiating repertoire. U.S. presidents since Eisenhower have attempted, with limited success, to get NATO allies to increase their "burden-sharing" for the West's collective defense. Given the perpetually asymmetrical level of costs borne by the United States, Trump's frustration with allies is as unsurprising as are his efforts to get allies to do more. Washington should not be expected to care more for allies' security than do the allies themselves.³

Comparing national spending levels is an imperfect method of measuring defense efforts to be sure. But the new administration is likely to find intolerable that NATO Europe and Canada have a combined GDP nearly equal to that of the United States, with per capita defense spending at \$669 per year, while the annual per capita defense spending by the United States, at \$2,239, is over 300 percent greater.⁴ In addition, it appears that more than a few wealthy NATO members, including Belgium, Canada, Italy, Luxembourg, and Spain, still spend fewer than two percent of their respective GDPs on defense, after first committing in 2006 to meet that minimalist threshold. Allies who believe that, in an era of unprecedented threats and crises, a new Trump Administration will continue Washington's pattern of benignly overlooking such allied "free riding" are likely to be deeply disappointed. There is a disturbing contradiction in some wealthy allies calling on the collective defense of the NATO Alliance but not contributing seriously to the cost of collective security capabilities.

As a result of Trump's sharp language regarding this imbalance in burden-sharing, some U.S. allies long accustomed to relying heavily on Uncle Sam for their ultimate security now fear U.S. withdrawal from NATO and their consequent vulnerability to a looming entente of aggressive, authoritarian powers, notably China, Russia, Iran and North Korea. Russia and China fan this fear by casting doubt on U.S. reliability in their attempts to divide the United States and allies. Some German observers now conclude, for example, that Berlin will have to find alternatives for the U.S. extended nuclear deterrent against nuclear coercion and attack. This German commentary ranges from Berlin's acquisition of nuclear weapons to the "Europeanization" of the French and British nuclear arsenals.⁵ Neither of these options appears highly practicable, at least in the near term.⁶ In South Korea, surveys now consistently show majority public support for the acquisition of an independent nuclear arsenal.⁷



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Given these manifest allied fears and discussions, it is important to point out the material difference between the “America First” agenda’s obvious rejection of cosmopolitan U.S. policies and the feared U.S. adoption of isolationist policies. The former does not equate to the latter, as so many commentaries at home and abroad seem to assume.

The populist movement behind President-elect Trump most assuredly is *not cosmopolitan*, in the sense that has occasionally characterized Washington’s behavior in the past. Trump populists generally reject the cosmopolitan canon that the world can be a cooperative, harmonious community if only freed from the stifling, antiquated notion of nationhood – that national borders and identities are artificial constructs and archaic impediments to global governance and harmony.⁸ The motto “America First” has meaning. Trump voters consider sovereign borders and national identity as foundational to proper U.S. governance and spending. They do not see themselves first as “global citizens” with a priority obligation to some concept of a “global community”; they do not have an associated mild or sharp disdain for American patriotism, borders, power, and sovereignty. They do not favor Washington spending their tax dollars to advance a globalist agenda and institutions at the expense of American jobs, security and prosperity. When trade-offs must be made, they do not support the U.S. Government sacrificing their well-being to advance globalist ideals, institutions or causes célèbres. Particularly galling to these voters were the recent images of Biden handing out a billion dollars in Angola, while some citizens in North Carolina were still living in tents and NGO-provided campers following an October hurricane.

While there clearly has been an overarching cosmopolitan strain in U.S. behavior for decades,⁹ under a new Trump Presidency, adversaries are likely to find a robust U.S. parry to their thrusts. There also will not likely be any “going abroad in search of monsters to destroy,”¹⁰ as previously advanced by Republican neo-conservatives. There is unlikely to be support for UN organs that are manifestly hostile to the United States and U.S. interests, no global “apology tour” as in the Obama Administration, and no fast-track citizenship for the millions of migrants who illegally crossed the southern U.S. border.

However, it is critical to understand that the populist movement behind Trump also is *not isolationist* in the sense that seems to inspire allied fears. Some illustrations of this point were found in the recent Reagan National Defense survey:¹¹

- A large majority of Trump voters believes the United States should be more engaged in the world and take the lead on the world stage;
- A supermajority of Americans wants the United States to spend more on national defense;
- A large majority wants the US to be prepared to win two foreign wars simultaneously;
- A majority wants to continue sending weapons to Ukraine, but a majority also wants a negotiated settlement;
- A large majority supports defending NATO allies if attacked; and
- A large majority favors continuing military aid to Israel.



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These are not isolationist views.

It is helpful to recall that the first Trump Administration exhibited none of the isolationist agenda now so concerning to some allies and domestic commentators. In addition to orchestrating the historic Abraham Accords, the Trump Administration's 2018 *Nuclear Posture Review* (NPR) attributed high value to extending credible deterrence and assuring allies.¹² It also initiated a new nuclear capability, the sea-launched nuclear cruise missile (SLCM-N), for the purpose of strengthening extended deterrence in the face of Russia's manifestly hostile designs and expanding theater nuclear forces.¹³ These were not the actions of an administration seeking to withdraw from international engagement and to close the nuclear umbrella in the face of mounting nuclear threats. In contrast, the subsequent Biden Administration sought, unsuccessfully, to cancel SLCM-N.

The Trump Administration's 2018 NPR's emphasis on sustaining extended deterrence and assuring allies essentially recognized the fact that U.S. withdrawal to an isolationist "Fortress America" would likely leave the "rimlands" of Eurasia vulnerable to aggressive, authoritarian regimes that are more powerful than America's allies individually, and will be so for the foreseeable future.¹⁴ Protecting those allied rimlands, of course, entails risk and financial burden for the United States. However, leaving them to their fate also would entail considerable risk and financial burden, including the potential nightmare of aggressive, hostile powers consolidating much of the human, material and technological resources of Eurasia. Two vast oceans and distance no longer provide American security; isolationism as an organizing policy is more than a century out of date.

In summary, the "America First" movement's opposition to cosmopolitan U.S. behavior should not be conflated with isolationism, as seems to be the expectation of so much allied and domestic commentary. The populist movement behind President-elect Trump wants a powerful United States involved in the world—a United States that deals with opponents from a position of great strength. Recognizing that Trump voters and his "America First" agenda are not cosmopolitan, but also are not isolationist, is important to understanding the political movement behind Trump and the likely broad-brush strokes of an "America First" agenda. While all speculation of the political future is inherently less than certain, it is safe to say that the new Trump Administration is highly unlikely to fold the extended nuclear umbrella or withdraw from NATO. More likely is a real increase in U.S. defense budgets and the strengthening of U.S. capabilities needed for deterrence, including extended deterrence, for allies who come to terms with the reality that the years of free riding are over.

¹ See for example, "An update from the editor: What a review of the pre-election Iowa Poll has found," *Des Moines Register*, November 17, 2024, available at <https://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/opinion/columnists/from-the-editor/2024/11/17/editors-update-what-a-review-of-the-pre-election-iowa-poll-has-found/76300644007/>.

² Quoted in, *National Public Radio, Fresh Air: World*, hosted by Dave Davies, "From high tariffs to isolation, what a 2nd Trump term might mean for foreign policy," November 13, 2024, available at <https://www.npr.org/2024/11/13/g-s1-34010/from-high-tariffs-to-isolation-what-a-2nd-trump-term-might-mean-for-foreign-policy>.



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³ As candidly observed by then-Secretary of Defense Mattis. See, Helene Cooper, “Defense Secretary Mattis Tells NATO Allies to Spend More, or Else,” *The New York Times*, February 15, 2017, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/15/world/europe/jim-mattis-nato-trump.html>.

⁴ See, NATO Public Diplomacy Division, Press Release, *Defense Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014-2024)*, p. 12, available at https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2024/6/pdf/240617-def-exp-2024-en.pdf.

⁵ See, Keith Payne and Michael Rühle, “President-Elect and Extended Deterrence: Whither Germany?” National Institute for Public Policy, *Information Series*, No. 605, November 6, 2024, available at https://nipp.org/information_series/keith-b-payne-and-michael-ruhle-president-elect-trump-and-extended-nuclear-deterrence-whither-germany-no-605-november-6-2024/. See also Michael Rühle, and Keith Payne, “Die Kultur des Trittbrettfahrens ist Vorbei,” *Welt am Sonntag*, July 21, 2024, p. 9.

⁶ See Michael Rühle, “German Musings About a Nuclear Deterrent,” National Institute for Public Policy, *Information Series*, No. 571, January 3, 2024, available at https://nipp.org/information_series/michael-ruhle-german-musings-about-a-european-nuclear-deterrent-no-571-january-3-2024/.

⁷ See for example, Shi Jiangtao, “Why Japan and South Korea are Debating Joining the Nuclear Club,” *South China Morning Post* (Hong Kong), August 7, 2024, available at <https://www.scmp.com/opinion/china-opinion/article/3273440/could-japan-and-south-korea-join-nuclear-club-cold-war-fears-put-prospect-play>.

⁸ For a commentary illustrating a cosmopolitan allegiance vice a national allegiance, see, Martha Nussbaum, “Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism,” *Boston Review* (October-November 1994). See also, Martha Nussbaum, “Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism,” in, Martha Nussbaum and Joshua Cohen, eds., *For Love of Country?* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), pp. 3-20.

⁹ See, Lee Harris, “The Cosmopolitan Illusion,” *Policy Review* (April/May 2003), available at <https://www.hoover.org/publications/policy-review/april-may-2003>; see also the discussion in, Adda Bozeman, “War and the Clash of Ideas,” *Orbis*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (Spring 1976), pp. 76-102.

¹⁰ The famous phrase by then Secretary of State John Quincy Adams. See, Patrick Garrity, *In Search of Monsters to Destroy* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, 2012).

¹¹ See *Reagan National Defense Survey Shows Strong, Growing Support for U.S. Leadership in the World*, December 5, 2024, available at https://www.reaganfoundation.org/media/363281/2024-survey_press-release_final.pdf?srsltid=AfmBOqUFwPdrma3Nbf-dS72KJcpi-cnO87SDWQmHnsqrWI96ZcwilO_.

¹² Department of Defense, Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review* (February 2018), pp. viii, 22-23, 34-37, available at <https://media.defense.gov/2018/feb/02/2001872886/-1/-1/1/2018-nuclear-posture-review-final-report.pdf>.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. xi-xiii, 52-55.

¹⁴ For an excellent, concise elaboration of geopolitics, heartlands and rimlands see, Colin S. Gray, *Geopolitics of the Nuclear Era: Heartland, Rimlands, and the Technological Revolution* (New York: Crane, Russak, 1977).

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