

# America First at Home and Abroad



June 18, 2018    *Topic:* Security    *Region:* Americas    *Tags:* America First, Donald Trump, Foreign Policy, Globalism, National Security

---

Trump's case for America First must refute internationalism's root strategic assumptions and transform the nation's definition of foreign-policy success.

---

by Alan Tonelson

IT'S INCREASINGLY OBVIOUS that Donald Trump is talking a much better America First foreign policy game than he's playing.

Like his campaign and his inaugural address, his presidency so far has featured plenty of rhetoric lambasting the “globalism” of his predecessors, and threatening a decisive break with their diplomatic approach. Some important policy decisions do seem consistent with the inward-looking America First approach that was taken by the United States before Pearl Harbor, and that was marked by the grim, classically realist view that all the world's countries are condemned to struggle for power and wealth, and that allies are much less long-lasting than interests. The leading examples are Trump's withdrawal of the United States from the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement, the Paris climate accord, and the Iran nuclear deal; his crackdowns on illegal immigration and on refugee admissions from allegedly

dangerous countries; and his relative indifference to human rights abuses abroad.

But in security affairs, the president has also reaffirmed America's major European and Asian alliance commitments—including the nuclear risk they create. He has continued a Middle East policy that assumes Washington can use military force skillfully enough, and is supported by reliable regional partners, to end the Islamic terrorist threat to the region's stability and to the United States. Trump and senior aides have repeatedly endorsed the standard globalist view that the nation's security and prosperity depend critically on maintaining its "global leadership."

Economically, his administration has signaled considerable willingness to grant U.S.-based businesses trade protection, and has certainly rattled Canada, Mexico and many American companies by playing hardball on renegotiating the North American Free Trade Agreement. But he's so far refrained from imposing or supporting sweeping tariffs (e.g., to punish China for currency manipulation or intellectual property theft, or to discourage production offshoring via the border adjustment levy included in the Republican House's original version of the recently passed tax bill). He's worked strictly, though aggressively, within the existing U.S. trade law system to deal with most corporate complaints. And his aides speak of reforming, not leaving, the World Trade Organization (WTO).

In fact, President Trump has even engaged in a practice that he's described as being as characteristic of globalism (which most analysts call "internationalism") as it is dangerously shortsighted: "trading away its security for prosperity." What other explanation could there be for his offer of better trade deals for China if it helps Washington resolve the North Korea crisis?

All told, far from rejecting post-World War II internationalism either conceptually or operationally, Trump's foreign policy seems focused on

improving its core arrangements from the standpoint of hard-pressed Main Street Americans. In this respect, Trump's positions evoke nothing so much as the policies of a White House predecessor whose internationalist credentials are rarely questioned: Richard Nixon. Ironically, though, the current president has (so far) done far less damage to postwar institutions than Nixon's New Economic Policy, which actually brought down the Bretton Woods international monetary system.

Nonetheless, though he stopped well short of genuine America Firstism, there are plenty of reasons for the president and the nation at large to ponder its potential virtues. First, few of the challenges that have prompted the search for dramatic alternatives have subsided much, if at all—whether it's Islamic-related terrorism, Chinese expansionism, job offshoring, illegal immigration or the spread of nuclear weapons to rogue states. So even if the lure of a more modest role in the world is resisted during this presidency, chances are it will return in the next.

Second, the Nixon experience and the ensuing decades warn powerfully against seeking internationalism on the cheap—numerous efforts to do so have all failed. Just recall Nixon's own initiatives, left-of-center calls to “Come Home, America,” the noninterventionism pushed by libertarians at the Cato Institute and paleoconservatives like Pat Buchanan, the similar entreaties from leading establishmentarian realists like George F. Kennan, and William G. Hyland and Jeane J. Kirkpatrick—especially once the Cold War ended. These proposals have both been rejected by the rest of the professional foreign policy community, and have also failed to convince many elected officials that they are key to winning elections.

The best way for America Firsters to start thoroughly revamping U.S. foreign policy is by identifying the fatal mistakes that have repeatedly—and inevitably—scuttled reform internationalists in the past, and thereby identifying how best to avoid them. Two in particular stand out.

First, precisely because they have been, in the end, internationalists, these mainstream foreign policy dissenters have endorsed internationalism's root assumption, which has stemmed from the ostensibly timeless lessons of the nation's 1930s indifference to aggression in Europe and Asia: that America's security, freedom and prosperity are inseparable from the security, freedom and prosperity of a critical mass of the rest of the world in which trouble anywhere is sure to spread like wildfire unless checked. Hence, the longstanding dominance in American foreign policy rhetoric of images like fire brigades, contagion, falling dominoes and of slogans like "peace is indivisible."

As a result, these reform internationalists have also bought into the fundamental policy conclusion drawn by internationalists. This has not—as widely thought—been the mission of containing the spread of the top Cold War—era threats to this global security, freedom and prosperity: Soviet and/or Chinese Communism and their offshoots. For as is clear from active American post—Cold War engagement in seemingly marginal regions, underlying this imperative all along was the deeper conviction that the entire global environment needed to be managed adequately to achieve internationalism's ambitious goals and their crucial benefits for the United States.

And since the dissenters have endorsed the inescapability of worldwide stewardship, they have also endorsed the instruments not only logically proclaimed as essential to turn an historically anarchic and violent international system into something more orderly—and in fact more akin to a domestic political community—but whose nurturing itself just as logically has approached the vital interest level. Hence the insistence by internationalists and these dissenters alike that American purposes over any meaningful time span positively demand prioritizing the maintenance of both military alliances for the common defense, as well as institutions and rules and norms for governing relations within this emerging community,

over insisting on any particular balances of risks and costs within these arrangements.

Hence also the failure of numerous burden-sharing efforts. Even hard-nosed reform internationalists like Nixon time and again ignored lessons taught in Bargaining 101 or by game theory—namely, that prevailing in negotiations is difficult without a willingness to walk away. Even worse, when this unwillingness is advertised, as per a frequent internationalist practice, success becomes far less likely.

Not even failure in Vietnam spurred a qualitative strategic reassessment by internationalists or mainstream dissenters. But they could hardly ignore the strains and flaws it revealed. Since internationalism's adoption, U.S. leaders faced a challenge in bridging the gap between the doctrine's theoretically open-ended goals and the inevitable limits on the nation's material power, and on the public's appetite for risk and cost. With the gap seeming wider than ever in Vietnam's wake, new ways to square these circles were urgently needed. So in addition to established force multipliers—like alliances, international organizations, the multilateral approaches these institutions represent and even nuclear weapons themselves (long viewed as equalizers against superior communist conventional forces)—internationalists and mainstream dissenters touted a long string of supposed surrogates for American blood and treasure that have been as creative as they've been unsuccessful.

As a result, post-Vietnam internationalism has rested on a new doctrine shared by the mainstream dissidents as well—that although the United States is no longer strong, wealthy and wise enough to achieve on its own internationalism's formidable global management goals, it is more than strong, wealthy and wise enough to achieve these goals in tandem with those varied surrogates.

Equally important, dissenters themselves tend to reject as emphatically as the internationalists the idea that, on a regular basis, non-intervention and outright indifference might ever be the best of the sub-optimal choices that often face foreign policymakers of any country. Even in the case of countries so marginal that most Americans—understandably—can't find them on a map, the dissenters have regarded such inaction as a third-rail position supported by only minor voices on the libertarian Right and the guilt-saturated Left.

Just as damaging to the dissenters' cause has been a second major mistake: accepting a dimension of internationalism that is fundamentally stylistic—and even aesthetic—but whose political and emotional power shouldn't be underestimated. In fact, these optics have comprised much of the nation's definition of foreign policy success, and they flow from an equally important idea advanced by numerous international relations scholars: that countries deserving the title “great power” are defined largely by activity itself and by the ambitions they prize. That is, the initiative demonstrated and the instruments employed by foreign policymakers have been endowed with a significance independent of the agenda they serve, but one that naturally grows from internationalism's view of the world as endlessly threatening but also highly malleable.

In fact, this stylistic dimension of internationalism has both greatly strengthened the bias against international inaction that pervades American politics and also endowed it with a moral significance. Specifically, diplomatic passivity is dismissed as unacceptable, or at best a last resort, not only because of particular dangers it might permit to fester or opportunities it might leave unexploited, but because of the message it allegedly sends—to domestic and foreign audiences—about defects in the nation's character.

It's perfectly understandable that any government would worry about the domestic and foreign consequences of projecting standoffishness vis-à-vis

countries and issues accorded some significance. Much less understandable are the long string of stated official American concerns about messages they fear are sent (including to domestic audiences) by projecting standoffishness vis-à-vis countries and issues widely regarded as peripheral—of selfishness, narrow-mindedness, parochialism or mere indolence.

As unseemly as these traits might be in individuals, and as problematic when perceived in high stakes diplomacy, the dangers they pose when alleged in low- or no-stakes situations are anything but obvious. Nonetheless, the mainstream dissenters' determination to dissociate themselves from such charges has further reinforced their adamant opposition to noninterventionist positions.

An America First-type alternative to internationalism, therefore, needs to overcome both strategic and political challenges. Strategically, it needs to enable American leaders to avoid being gamed by allied and other free riders both in the security and economic spheres. Politically, it needs to explain compellingly the substantive virtues of noninvolvement in various foreign situations, and to remove the stigma so typically attached to inaction.

To accomplish these objectives, the case for America First must refute internationalism's root strategic assumptions, and in the process transform the nation's definition of foreign policy success. Specifically, America Firsters have to debunk the claims that America's fate is always or even usually inseparable from that of the international environment both in security and economic terms, and that this environment's comprehensive, continuous and conspicuously energetic global management is imperative. Their counterargument need not depict all or most of America's international connections as dangerous or marginal—a habit that feeds the establishment's insistence that the only internationalist alternatives are naively isolationist.



Instead, it will need to make clear that: (1) the nation enjoys numerous geopolitical and economic advantages that are intrinsic, or that have resulted overwhelmingly from domestic achievements, and are therefore completely unrelated to diplomacy or other forms of overseas engagement; (2) that these advantages are so impressive that, whatever their precise extent, they cannot fail to carry immense, often decisive and favorable strategic implications that no American leader who truly prioritizes his own country's interests would ignore; and (3) that the nature of these advantages permit a much more selective, less risky and less expensive approach to engagement in overseas situations than demanded by internationalism.

The sources of these advantages are so uncontroversial that they are central features of stock definitions and characterizations of the United States. Yet they are rarely credited with any strategic significance, and almost never with positive strategic significance. In fact, the conditions that militate for a less ambitious foreign policy are most often decried as the international system's version of sirens that continually tempt Americans into a dangerous complacency.

They fall into two broad, but often overlapping groupings: those that undergird U.S. national security, and those that underlie U.S. prosperity. Both groupings, in turn, undergird the nation's political independence.

Of all the widely discussed national security conditions, none has been more widely belittled, and for a longer period of time, than the country's geographic isolation. Yet no strategic asset remains more important. Of course, the protective power of the Atlantic and the Pacific has been compromised by the development of intercontinental weapons and the emergence of threats that "respect no borders," like climate change and pollution. And despite its relatively friendly (and relatively weak) North American neighbors, the United States has still needed to pay attention to continental issues like immigration.

But great transoceanic distances are anything but worthless. They have still surely accounted for the relative paucity of Islam-related terrorist attacks on American soil, and remain formidable, if not impenetrable, barriers to the transmission of epidemics. The oceans and benign neighbors, moreover, continue to help free Americans of worries about conventional military pressure or attack from hostile powers—which have been longstanding nightmares for Eurasian populations.

Further, as dangerous to Americans as those foreign ocean-spanning nuclear weapons remain in principle, the prospect of a first or retaliatory strike by nuclear-armed rivals has been reduced to the greatest extent possible by another strategic asset with no inherent relation to international activism—the country's immense military strength. In this case, America's own nuclear weapons and delivery systems with global range per se create the shield. The nation's armed forces and their long-range striking power, again combined with the oceans' width, also have virtually eliminated another threat common throughout history—land and naval invasion forces. American nuclear weapons could destroy invaders completely as soon as they left base or port.

This unsurpassed military strength is just one product of America's other major strategic assets whose relationship with international activism is stronger, but hardly decisive—those that have created history's most prosperous economy. The United States is of course a major global trade and investment player, and its currency has been the world's dominant medium of exchange for decades. Yet history clearly shows that this success overwhelmingly resulted from the country's development of a vast internal economy that steadily grew to continental dimensions.

Indeed, for most of the nineteenth century, both the export and import shares of GDP fell significantly and neither ever came close to topping 10

percent in pre-inflation or inflation-adjusted terms. Domestic output, therefore, was growing faster than trade.

Immigration figures prominently in America's development, but its magnitude was as much consequence as cause of robust domestic production; as U.S. farm exports flooded Europe, these helped to displace agricultural jobs in particular and sent the new labor surplus westward. And, although America's post-Civil War industrialization certainly was aided by investment from abroad (especially from Britain), net capital inflow into the country rarely exceeded small fractions of gross capital formation during the nineteenth century.

In other words, the American economy has historically been a strong, domestic-driven growth engine. It's been a model of diversity as well, thanks to a combination of manufacturing prowess, innovation and abundant natural resources. In many ways, it is so variegated that it's a remarkably good approximation of the global economy in (huge) microcosm. Thanks to this unique diversity and scale, the United States' level of economic self-sufficiency has always been lofty, and the potential for self-sufficiency remains great today—especially considering how hard its leaders have worked in recent decades to increase its ties with and therefore dependence on the rest of the economic world.

The strategic maxims of a non-internationalist, America First foreign policy all flow directly from the insistence that internationalism fundamentally misunderstands these geopolitical and economic realities, and the most effective assets it can bring to bear on overseas challenges and opportunities.

The first concerns internationalism's defining claim that the United States is the nation-state version of the Andersen fairy tale princess so exquisitely sensitive that she could feel a pea under a tower of mattresses. America Firsters would recognize that the United States is not acutely vulnerable to the slightest perturbations of the global ether. In fact, the country already

enjoys high levels of—and greater potential for—security, independence and prosperity. As a result, its policymakers are liberated both from the Herculean labors of comprehensive global management; and from the need to keep a wide quiver of institutional tools in good working order over the long haul. So U.S. leaders enjoy the luxury of viewing large swathes of the world with indifference.

When some form of engagement is unavoidable, America First–focused policymakers can set priorities based not on objectives that resist precise calculation—such as maintaining internationalist mechanisms and their supposedly impartial rules of behavior over the longest possible haul. Instead, true America Firsters would emphasize securing much shorter-term objectives that are much more easily calculated. These would entail discrete advantages and disadvantages to the United States of specific engagement decisions that reflect criteria such as the wealth, power, strategic location and other intrinsic qualities of the country or region in question. These qualities, of course, would be valued according to their abilities to create specific benefits or pose specific problems for the United States—if not immediately, then within finite and roughly estimable time frames.

As for the institutional tools themselves, an America First approach would by no means rule out their value or potential and immediately call it quits. But it would judge them in the same manner, in terms of their performance in defending or promoting discrete U.S. interests, and delivering payoffs sooner rather than later. It's true that the results would be institutional tools less legally or automatically reliable than today's. But even assuming that current alliances and international organizations deserve this reputation, America's own advantages and capabilities would curb the downside for U.S. policymakers, while the opportunities created for greater flexibility, and more and better options, would raise the upside. In other words, American foreign policy both inside and outside institutions would become explicitly utilitarian—or, as internationalists sneeringly describe it, “transactional.”

Second, and just as important, since the America First approach attributes the country's security, independence and prosperity primarily to its intrinsic characteristics and circumstances—and not to shaping the international environment actively—it holds that the main guarantor of its well-being is maximizing those intrinsic advantages. Thus, it sets as its paramount goals the creation and augmentation of power in all of its dimensions, as well as the maintenance and enhancement of its favored geopolitical position and its capacity for self-sufficiency.

A focus on ensuring power's availability and heightening self-sufficiency boasts several impressive advantages over the current strategy of orchestrating power's use and practically defining the value of autonomy out of existence. Principally, the America First foreign policy is safer and cheaper than internationalism because it emphasizes controlling what U.S. leaders can have relatively high confidence in controlling (their country's own actions) rather than controlling what they don't have confidence in controlling (the actions of others).

Just as important, America First policies also increase the odds of success for whatever international engagement is needed. It's easy to understand the benefits of great power, wealth and autonomy for unilateral actions. Yet their crucial importance for multilateral engagement is less well understood. Of course, on some issues, the United States will find it sensible to cooperate with others, and this looks to be especially true for the proverbial "problems that respect no borders," like disease, pollution and climate change. Nonetheless, because even countries with much in common will invariably approach various international issues with some different views—due to differing characteristics, cultures, historical experiences, etc.—the specific form taken by cooperative solutions will tend to reflect some countries' preferences more than others. Assuming that Americans wish their preferences to prevail to the greatest extent, they will find that, although some might be secured via suasion, many others will require using the

leverage created by power and wealth—either via carrots, sticks or some combination of both.

Lastly, for similar reasons, an America First strategy focused tightly on building strength and wealth and maximizing autonomy can best enable the nation to cope with the chronic unpredictability of world affairs. Yes, governments might one day learn how to foresee major foreign policy challenges and opportunities with some consistency. But the record shows that this day is far off. Prudence therefore dictates that Washington should start placing less emphasis on perfecting its crystal ball and acting on these insights, and more on improving its chances of coping successfully with the many events and developments that inevitably will catch it way off guard. This success in turn will require developing and preserving the largest number of promising options possible. These various options cannot guarantee foreign policy success. But as with multilateral diplomacy, undoubtedly the strong, the rich and the relatively insulated will have many more and better options—and therefore greater chances of success—than the weak, the poor and the deeply entangled.

Third, an America First strategy would change the definitions of foreign policy successes and of the great power status that, irrespective of results, have so warped Americans' expectations of appropriate foreign policy behavior. It would dissuade the nation from expecting a continuing stream of military interventions, alliance creation, international regime formation, bilateral and multilateral negotiations, treaty signings, foreign aid initiatives, and human rights pronouncements from Washington. Instead, it would convince the public that the United States is so intrinsically secure, prosperous and self-reliant that its best foreign policy decisions are often decisions to do nothing at all. In the process, America Firstism would helpfully move the nation much closer to a traditional, common-sense view of foreign policy as an exercise in achieving national aims that can't be

achieved through other means, or that can't best be achieved through other means.

America First leaders, therefore, would foster the understanding that a great power is not defined mainly by what it does on the international stage. It is defined, as emphasized by Kenneth Waltz and other realist scholars, by what it is: the assets it can apply to those efforts when they are necessary or desirable, or can simply keep at the ready. Unlike internationalists, America Firsters would not assume that the country is strong, wealthy or wise enough to shape world events decisively—even with allies and institutional tools. But they would insist that the United States is more than strong, wealthy and wise enough to achieve the goals it should regard as essential—acceptable levels of safety, freedom and well-being—through its own devices, without questing for worldwide reform. And this approach would concentrate its efforts on preserving these capabilities.

Sketching out America First approaches to some of today's leading foreign policy issues shows how these insights can produce a revamped foreign policy that differs profoundly both from mainstream internationalism and from the partial Trumpian departure—and improves substantially on both.

America First-oriented leaders would agree with President Trump that the nation's main security alliances in Europe and Asia have become increasingly unsatisfactory arrangements. But in present circumstances, America Firsters would focus not on the economic and financial inequities that irk Trump—and that are indeed difficult to justify given the allies' prosperity and their far greater vulnerability to aggression.

Instead, they would bridle at the dramatically worsening risk-reward security calculus. Specifically, both NATO and America's security relationships with Japan and (especially) South Korea are now posing relentlessly growing risks of nuclear war—including an attack on the United States—even though developments in those regions have not directly

threatened America's own security. And although the U.S. nuclear umbrella over these regions during the Cold War also was based on threatening to trigger an all-engulfing holocaust, America Firsters would stress today that conditions have changed substantially in each case.

In Europe, the prime targets of Russia's designs are not longstanding allies like the United Kingdom, France or Germany. Nor, as a result, are they major centers of military-industrial power—as America's original containment doctrine had dubbed them. Instead, they are countries such as Ukraine and the Baltic states, which have never been seen as significant American interests for any number of major reasons. They are indefensible with conventional weapons alone—barring the kind of military buildup that neither the United States nor its other NATO allies has ever seriously considered—because they are located literally on Russia's doorstep. Indeed, for decades, they were part of the Soviet Union with no discernible impact on America's own security, independence or prosperity. They are economically marginal to boot.

Nonetheless, because they're full-fledged NATO members, the Baltics enjoy the legal right to U.S. military protection that would need to threaten all-out nuclear war in order to succeed, but whose bluff could well be called because their manifest unimportance gravely weakens the credibility of such threats. Consequently, American leaders face the worst of both possible worlds.

Not that ways out that preserve the policy status quo can't be identified—chiefly, as suggested, big conventional forces buildups in endangered countries. But even with the needed political will to create them, unless the new units could defeat a Russian assault on their own, their purpose would be serving as tripwires aimed at bolstering deterrence by practically ensuring the escalation of any fighting to the nuclear level.

Although President Trump has greatly stepped up an Obama administration initiative to expand the U.S. military footprint in the region, America Firsters



would view these moves as dangerously mistaken. For they would go far toward denying a president any real options on a decision that should always result from choice, not necessity—whether or not to engage in a conflict that could expose American territory to nuclear attack.

An America First–oriented president would recognize that courting such dangers to defend less-than-vital interests veritably defines recklessness. Indeed, even internationalist presidents have appeared to agree—hence their reluctance to station even modest forces in Eastern Europe permanently. Therefore, a genuine foreign policy reformer would focus on bringing America’s goals in Europe and the means available to defend them into a much more sensible balance.

Specifically, an America First foreign policy would start devolving Europe’s defense responsibility to the Europeans, and phasing out the current NATO. The allies are more than wealthy enough to take on the challenge. Moreover, two European NATO members, the United Kingdom and France, already possess nuclear arsenals (the latter spawned precisely by the aforementioned nuclear credibility question, and consequent French skepticism that America would actually “risk New York to save Paris”). Phasing out the U.S. defense guarantee would generate the political will to create adequate militaries by eliminating continued free riding as an option.

Because Western Europe’s hostile takeover would seriously harm (though hardly decimate) American economic interests, an America First foreign policy could justify maintaining rapidly deployable conventional forces capable of reinforcing the region if needed. Such “leading from behind” would also ensure that the military infrastructure and institutional arrangements built up under NATO are not completely wasted. Washington could further assist by selling the Europeans any conventional or nuclear weapons they desired—strengthening the U.S. economy and balance of payments in the process. But the bottom line would be sunseting today’s

NATO by a date certain—possibly within five or ten years of the decision’s announcement.

The risk of the nuclear umbrella to American security is rising even faster in Asia. As widely recognized, North Korea has made unexpectedly rapid progress in building nuclear-tipped missiles that can strike the U.S. homeland. As is not widely recognized, the tripwire forces that the United States seems to be bolstering in Eastern Europe already exist in South Korea, the country most immediately threatened. Therefore, for the first time since America has extended the nuclear umbrella over South Korea, the nuclear war of necessity Washington might need to fight in Seoul’s defense could result in the destruction of an American city. Or two. Or three.

And although tripwire-centered deterrence arguably worked against China in the Far East (and Soviet aggression against Western Europe), the North Korean regime looks qualitatively different. Chiefly, neither Kim Jong-un nor his father or grandfather ever showed much interest in establishing normal, peaceful relations with the United States—or for that matter, with any major country. Indeed, even independent of its missile and nuclear weapons tests, its record of aggression has been matched by few countries in recent decades.

An America First president would understand the urgent need to rethink completely an alliance whose price could soon make September 11 look like arm-wrestling matches. And he or she would view this vulnerability as even less acceptable because of the free riding so largely responsible. Seoul has promised to boost its defense spending as a share of its gross domestic product, but the goal is still only 2.9 percent—although it arguably has long lived in the world’s most dangerous neighborhood. Meanwhile, its economy is likely to have been the world’s seventh largest last year. North Korea’s is miniscule. Why can’t Seoul match the North’s bloated military man-for-man and tank-for-tank?

South Korea's politics make it a problematic ally, too, as evinced by its foot-dragging on the deployment of a U.S. anti-missile system and the blasé views of much of its population about the North Korea threat—which no doubt partly explain its paltry military spending. Nothing is more understandable than South Korea's desire to avoid a devastating conflict. But an America First president would recognize that the stakes for the United States now are simply too high to pay it much heed. This approach would also note the comparable ambivalence (for different reasons) marking China's views about North Korea's nuclear forces, along with Russia's chortling from the sidelines at America's predicament—along with evidence of sanctions-busting by both.

And the conclusion would be obvious: North Korea's closest neighbors—except for Japan—seem ready to accept Pyongyang's nuclear status. Therefore, why should the United States, located a world away, be more alarmed? The only reason is the tripwire—which also creates the only plausible reason for Kim Jong-un to risk his own country's destruction via a nuclear exchange with America's overwhelmingly superior forces. An America First policy would remove the tripwire, and allow the big, strong, wealthy countries of Northeast Asia to handle Kim Jong-un as they see fit. Remaining nerves in Japan (and South Korea) can be calmed with sales of conventional weapons, too.

An America Firster in the White House would also drop U.S. opposition to the Japanese and South Korean acquisition of nuclear weapons. Unlike the situation in Europe, nuclear-armed American allies in Asia would undermine the legitimate American goal of preventing the further proliferation of such weapons. But such a U.S. leader would understand that a nuclear Japan and South Korea are all but inevitable, precisely because extended nuclear deterrence against an adversary with North Korea's increasingly intercontinental capabilities isn't a credible enough foundation for their core

security. Indeed, such concerns explain why public support for nuclearization is growing steadily in both countries.

Although less closely followed than developments in North Korea, China's ongoing nuclear force modernization presents similar challenges to America's escalation dominance in Asia—and would convince America First leaders that the country's entire strategy toward the Asia-Pacific requires similar changes. Given that continuing to resist China's regional expansionism increasingly risks a Sino-American war that also could trigger a nuclear strike on U.S. soil, an America First strategy would phase out the nation's alliances and forward deployments throughout the region. Just as with Japan and South Korea, the United States should offer other former Asia-Pacific allies whatever conventional weapons they wish to buy—a step that could deter further Chinese muscle-flexing by raising the prospect of encirclement by well-armed neighbors.

An America First president would understand that the country's European and Asian allies are major U.S. economic partners. But he or she would not balk at needed change for fear of losing American economic influence. Instead, this president would realize that evidence for crediting extended deterrence with creating major influence is difficult at best to find. Otherwise, would Japan and South Korea remain such difficult trade partners?

It is anything but coincidental that the Middle East has joined Southeast Asia as the scene of one of the worst failures of American internationalism. In both regions, internationalist leaders expended vast amounts of national blood and treasure to achieve their entire suite of goals—entailing the transformation of turbulent and even failed parts of the world into regions successful enough to resist hostile influences.

Southeast Asia stands today as an exemplar of economic development and relatively free government. Yet Washington never identified compelling,

specific economic or security stakes for the United States that could remotely justify the sacrifices made decades ago on behalf of these aims.

The Middle East's oil has long represented such a stake, and the emergence of terrorists capable of devastating attacks on U.S. territory created another. But the American goals of alliance building and eventual transformation have remained firmly intact despite abundant evidence that the ingredients for neither objective exist. Most Middle East countries, after all, are too internally divided and weak to serve as reliable allies—or to cohere in their current forms. And they seem hobbled by a culture that prizes scapegoating and vengeance over constructive action.

A domestic response is much likelier to contain the terrorist threat than “fighting it over there”—namely, “keeping them away from here.”

As internationalist foreign and defense policies have striven to push an existentially secure United States ever more deeply and broadly into the affairs of dangerous, increasingly dangerous, or marginal foreign regions, internationalist economic policies have striven to increase the dependence of an existentially self-sufficient country on a world of generally poorer, less stable, and often unfriendly countries. An America First international trade policy would reverse these priorities. It would dispense with neoclassical economists' longtime dream of ever deeper worldwide economic integration producing the optimal global division of labor and output regardless of individual nations' relative performance. Instead, it would aim to maximize America's autonomy and relative performance.

The national security and political independence benefits of such approaches are well recognized, and of course defense-related products and industries are to varying degrees recognized as exceptions to free trade principles. In addition, although mainstream economists vehemently disagree, the records of post-World War II Asia and Germany represent impressive evidence for the economic advantages created by such mercantilism.

But so does the roughly first two-thirds of America's own history—precisely because of the massive scale and impressive diversity of its economy that, if anything, are both even greater. It's easy to see why these characteristics would suffice to create a substantial degree of self-sufficiency—albeit one that, according to mainstream economics, would purportedly sacrifice significant efficiency, consumer welfare and wealth in an absolute sense.

Additionally, the nation's actual and potential diversity could well eliminate or greatly reduce these tradeoffs. After all, trade is thought to boost efficiency and therefore wealth-creation—along with raising quality and lowering prices—largely because it fosters more competition than any single national economy can generate.

No one can reasonably doubt that this extra competition would have a tremendous impact even on large national economies. But what about the impact on a national economy that turns out one fourth of the world's total goods and services all by itself? Is the relationship one for one? That is, does the \$56 trillion of global output generated outside America's borders expose the \$18 trillion American domestic economy to three times the competitive pressure that it creates on its own? Could the multiplier effect be greater? Why wouldn't it be smaller? In fact, especially since much of the world economy is far less advanced industrially and technologically than the United States, why wouldn't the competition multiplier generated by international trade be much smaller? And couldn't it even be small enough to pale next to the economic and social dislocations caused by unfettered trade?

From the opposite standpoint, if any foreign competition is critical to creating and maintaining satisfactory competitive pressures on domestic producers, why have American inventors spurred so many major technological breakthroughs without any apparent pressure from abroad, ranging from the cotton gin and the telegraph to the integrated circuit to the

Internet? Similarly, if foreign competition is crucial to quality, why are so many Japanese and South Korean brand autos so excellent?

Moreover, opening a domestic economy to foreign competition isn't the only way to intensify competitive pressure. National governments can also ratchet up anti-trust policies.

As a result, an America First president would seek to expand existing trade only if and when: such moves would boost the nation's growth on net; bring access to products and services that are either unavailable at home, or available only at prohibitively expensive prices; and that would significantly increase competitive pressure on domestic producers and service providers as long as these pressures come from entirely private sector actors.

Because actual and potential U.S. levels of self-sufficiency (at reasonable costs) are so high, because domestic opportunities to intensify competitive pressures are so readily available, and because as a result, the nation's need to expand trade would be modest, an America First president would also recognize that the United States approaches global trade from a position of considerable strength. Further, he or she would understand the additional leverage America enjoys as the longstanding consumer of last resort in a world full of economies heavily reliant on net exports for adequate growth.

As a result, most U.S. trade diplomacy in an America First administration would consist not of American diplomats negotiating at length with foreign governments to draw up detailed new rules of trade either for existing agreements or new deals. Nor would it entail seeking more equitable trade relationships by bringing many more cases to the WTO.

Instead, it would consist of the United States withdrawing from the WTO, unilaterally determining the requirements that foreign governments will need to meet to ensure their producers certain levels of access to the American market, and then announcing those requirements. Especially

important would be stipulations that, in many cases, foreign companies or domestic firms that produce offshore wishing to sell their products in the United States make all or part of them in the United States, or transfer critical technologies to American partners.

Trade partners would of course be free to offer counterproposals, but Washington would have the final say. The United States would also serve as judge, jury and appeals court for the disputes that inevitably would arise—including those resulting from its own enterprises' complaints about foreign practices in the U.S. market or overseas markets.

Although strong cases can be made that the substance of a genuine America First foreign policy will more effectively protect and advance U.S. interests, and that public opinion is receptive, the Trump experience indicates that a big question still hangs over its future prospects: can American politics produce leaders able to engineer the needed changes?

Of course, American elections have brought to power any number of mainstream politicians, and through them any number of policy operatives, skilled, experienced, and knowledgeable enough to maintain the status quo competently and even effect important reforms. And as shown by Trump's election, the White House can be won by an outsider with avowedly disruptive ambitions who is largely unfamiliar with Washington's formal and informal levers of power (and lacking an advisory corps large and savvy enough to at least partly tame the federal bureaucracy).

But what is still unknown is whether a leader unconventional enough to develop or support truly innovative foreign policy ideas can rise to the top through the current political system and all of its stay-the-course influences and incentives. Equally uncertain—can the world outside mainstream political and policy circles produce a leader both willing to think and act outside establishment boxes, yet versed enough in its ways to achieve



transformational goals? And perhaps most important of all: can the nation produce such a leader before war or depression make overhaul unavoidable?

The answers may determine the future not only of America's foreign policy, but its broader prospects as well.

*Alan Tonelson is the Founder of RealityChek, a blog on economics and national security, and a columnist for IndustryToday.com. In 2016, he advised both the Trump and Sanders campaigns on international trade issues.*

Image: U.S. President Donald Trump departs after visiting first lady Melania Trump at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center, where she is recovering from kidney surgery, in Bethesda, Maryland, U.S. May 15, 2018. REUTERS/Jonathan Ernst

---

**Source URL:** <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/america-first-home-abroad-26326>