



How Donald Trump's Personality Shapes U.S. Foreign Policies

Christian Tuschhoff

Introduction

The current president of the United States, Donald Trump, is a highly controversial figure. Many people especially in Europe have no sympathy for him and his public appearances disgust them. For example, the trust of Germans in the United States under the Trump administration is at an all-time low (Atlantik-Brücke 2019: 6-9). Others – most importantly loyal supporters among American voters – respond with high motivation to his way of communicating and staging himself. These supporters buy his message that he went to the American capital in order to fight for their cause. They are disappointed by established political elites, lobbyist, and traditional media and believe that those “politicians” pursue selfish interests only rather than represent the American people. They therefore attack Trump because he gets in their way of capturing American politics for their parochial self-interest. Trump supporters therefore interpret criticism and strong opposition against “their” president as ample proof that his fight for their cause (Tuschhoff 2019b) is both, necessary and successful. Because Trump faces such fierce opposition from the political establishment, supporters infer, his counteroffensive aggressiveness is inevitable and justified.

There is no doubt Donald Trump strongly divides publics worldwide into supporters and opponents. Very few people don't have an opinion on his personality and style as president. Yet, in the academic world it is even more important to ask how such an atypical president affects U.S. foreign policies. Does his controversial personal character matter for international relations?

Most specialists in international relations do not think that individual factors impact foreign relations. In their view it is more international structures or domestic interests that drive foreign affairs. Still, a minority of scholars took a closer look at Donald Trump to assess if and how his atypical character shapes U.S. foreign relations.

The following section traces this research. It is part of a larger research project and a recent conference paper presented in Heidelberg in October 2019 (Tuschhoff 2019a).

Peculiarities of Trump's Negotiation Style.

Some political scientists who support the foreign policy of the Trump administration claim that it follows the neorealist theory of international relations. Most importantly, it ends the time of American expansionism in the world. According to this view “America First” means returning to home and use the so-called strategy of “off-shore balancing” rather than highly active policy interventions in other countries and the world as a whole (Schweller 2018). After all, Trump has shown a remarkable reluctance to engage in wars, even when opportunities to do so presented themselves.

However, scholars who employ psychological methods to assess Trump's personality and personal traits deny that he follows the neorealist theory of international. Instead he is driven only by a desire to satisfy his personal narcissistic needs (Rathbun 2018: 99-100; Wolf 2017: 101). They claim, that a self-interested actor must be able to act strategically in order to successfully negotiate in international

relations. The necessary trait for such a rational strategic action is “epistemological motivation.” It means the desire and willingness to carefully think through and evaluate all available options. Strategic actors rarely rely on instinct. Epistemic motivation generates a commitment to reason and is therefore conducive to procedural rationality. Moreover, epistemic motivation facilitates carefully calculating options in the light of preexisting preferences and choosing the one that maximizes them most. This choice is called “instrumental rationality” (Rathbun/ Kertzer/ Paradis 2017: S34).

Rathbun expects Trump’s foreign policy to fail because he lacks personal traits important for conducting effective diplomacy. These include not only empathy but also “instrumental empathy.” Trump terribly overstates how even a strong hegemon such as the United States can force through its foreign agenda (Rathbun 2018: 100). Because he lacks “epistemic motivations,” he is neither a strategic thinker nor a good dealmaker. Therefore, his foreign policy is largely expressive and will get in the way of potential accomplishments (Rathbun 2018: 101).

Scholars of behavioral economics and psychology distinguish between “proself” and “pro-social” individuals.¹ Donald Trump can be safely put into the proself category. As a proself type Donald Trump is exclusively interested in his own gains relative to others. This relative gains’ orientation is fully compatible with the neorealist school of international relations theory. When opening negotiating, the proself individual makes extremely bad offers to the other side and asks more from them than other individuals would. Down the road of negotiations, proself individuals

are both opportunistic and exploitive. They respond to the weakness of others with higher demands (Kertzer/ Rathbun 2015: 618-620). This general characterization of proself individuals’ behavior is fully compatible with the behavior of president Donald Trump. Despite his usage of key terms of “fairness” and “reciprocity” proself types as Trump rarely seek to achieve these outcomes because they would require a more prosocial value orientation (Kertzer/ Rathbun 2015: 614-615). This finding squares well with the neorealist skepticism that international cooperation is likely.

Still, the proself orientation of Donald Trump is fully consistent and therefore partly explain why his administration is committed to the use of the so-called “transactional approach” in foreign. While the literature is less clear about the specific of this approach, I believe it is composed of the following conceptual considerations: international relations consist of relationships between mostly pairs of states. There are no meaningful groups of states. Relations are direct rather than mediated through international organizations. The relations between the United States and other states consist of individual transactions or “deals” (Trump), they do not have an intrinsic value of their own. In order to compute the cost-benefit-calculation of relationships the administration uses the transaction method of accounting, that significantly deviates from the balance sheet method. For each transaction between states, one calculates revenue and expenses. Both sides of the ledger are then aggregated to assess the profitability of the relationship as a whole. This method also allows the assessment of which transactions are profitable and which are losses. It allows to pursue the goal of

¹ Deviating from standard rationalist assumptions of economics these scholars propose that individuals often do not have stable and strong preferences that guide their

decisions. Instead, they update their beliefs when they receive signals from others and thereby amend their preferences (Kertzer/ Rathbun 2015: 616).

cutting losses and focus on the profitable relations only.

As a consequence, the Trump administration does not view relations with other states as stable and durable partnerships that usually rest upon the concept of “diffuse reciprocity.” Instead, for the Trump administration other states are short-term business partners for specific profitable transactions only. Relations are based on specific transactional reciprocity. The transactional approach also reveals, that the Trump administration believes in international relations as a zero-sum game (Hafner-Burton/ Narang/ Rathbun 2019: 708) and bases relationships upon the patron-client model (Eisenstadt/ Roniger 1984).

A good example of the transactional approach is the so-called “cost-plus-50 formula” with which the Trump administration calculates its reimbursement request for deploying military forces to protect its allies (Vandiver 2019). The formula means that allies must pay for the U.S. protection including the U.S. costs of deployment plus an additional 50 percent surcharge of these costs. This means that the Trump administration does not believe in an intrinsic value of maintaining a network of military bases abroad that serves American national interest but thinks that deploying military forces abroad only serves the purpose of protecting other states. Alliances are therefore perceived as undue burdens on the United States rather than invested assets (Thompson 2018: 152). However, detailed research showed that such a view is extremely short-sighted and that using a transactional approach for troop deployments abroad is extremely detrimental to national interests (Pettyjohn 2019).

Moreover, another aspect of Trump’s character will get in the way of political success: His bargaining style exemplifies “ego defensiveness” and “reactive

devaluation”: he complains about offers made to him and perceives his share of the pie as morally inadequate. With such a mindset, it is very difficult to establish stable relations with foreign leaders, maintain alliances, and develop a durable basis of supporters among Republicans in Congress (Rathbun 2018: 101-102). This personal trait guides him towards transactional forms of interaction, too.

Adam Davidson (2016) explained that Trump’s insistence on deal-making exposes a very particular understanding of how an economy works. Deals are agreements that redistribute fixed amounts of wealth in a zero-sum game. Transactions therefore do not generate growth as in a competitive environment when participants engage in mutually beneficial exchanges. Economic activity is mainly rent-seeking: actors who control scarce and monopolized resources can extract rents. This has been the situation in the Manhattan real estate market in which Trump has grown up and received his knowledge of how an economy works. Yet, such thinking predates an economy based on corporations rather than on families (Ninkovich 2018: 404). It corresponds well to Trump’s zero-sum nationalism (Blinken/ Kagan 2019), though, because nationalism worked well for free riders internationally. For him, the world does not consist of a global community but it is an area only, in which states compete for advantages (Ninkovich 2018: 406). These ideas share similarities with neorealism as Schweller (2018) observed. However, they do not form a consistent worldview of core beliefs but organize those only in a rather loose connection. These beliefs legitimize disrupting the international system as is but do not develop an alternative as replacement. Trump does not assume responsibility for maintaining international order and he does not seem concerned with the possibility of the system’s collapse (Ninkovich 2018: 395, 397, 407). Moreover, his nationalism and

understanding of “American greatness” are different from the common understanding of American exceptionalism. It is not the imagined better world based on the American example but American power which matters for him. He does not see the world as a society in the sociological sense but as the legal fiction of a family of nations (Ninkovich 2018: 405-406).

How Trump Processes Information

Trump’s understanding of the world is rooted in his immediate personal experience and the consumption of superficial forms of cultural media rather than detailed studies of history. He prefers digestible information delivered succinctly and he likes to make decisions off the top of his head based on his gut instinct (Hafner-Burton/ Narang/ Rathbun 2019: 709). He hates engaging in complex argumentations. Instead, he organizes information in dichotomous terms as “likes” and “dislikes” in order to avoid complexity or contradiction (Ninkovich 2018: 399). Apart from instincts that he believes happen to be right most of the time, he neither exposes a broad worldview² nor subscribes to an ideology that could guide his decisions and actions in general terms (Ninkovich 2018: 400). Paleoconservative authors praise Trump for promoting core ideas of the Old Republican Party and for his nationalism (Buchanan 2017; Kesler 2016/17). However, they do not go as far as claiming that Trump operates based on convictions even though some connections between paleoconservatives and Trump’s ideas exist (Ninkovich 2018: 408). His preoccupation with “deal making” is highly process-oriented and inhibits the articulation of ideological principles (Ninkovich 2018: 400).

² The new phrase of „global power competition” seems to get traction in the administration as well as the debates on foreign affairs among the Washington elite. Some of the presidential candidates of the Democratic Party caught on.

Trump’s lack of ideological views and commitment might be a cognitive liability because it seriously inhibits his ability to develop a strong and consistent worldview based on beliefs and convictions. A lack of interpretive frames undermines his ability to process information and to empathize with others. However, these cognitive liabilities can turn into political advantages in two ways. First, Trump demonstrates appreciation of the personal hurt of masses and he advocates nationalist solutions that these masses find appealing because nationalism is an intuitive default cultural response to the accumulated problems of globalization. By contrast, internationalist thought requires education most importantly the appreciation of counterintuitive reasoning (Ninkovich 2018: 402-403). Trump’s nationalism therefore partially explains why he enjoys strong support from loyalists that are mostly less educated and likely appreciate his reliance on instinct and his disdain for educated elites (Hafner-Burton/ Narang/ Rathbun 2019: 708). Second, the lack of ideological commitment affords Trump flexibility in forming political coalitions across partisan divides. His ignorance of American exceptionalism and the neoconservative repertoire of global democracy promotion (Rathbun 2018: 102) may limit him being perceived as a representative of ideologically committed elites and followers. Gaining their support may be difficult but not impossible as long as they believe that he represents their convictions as paleoconservatives do.

Trump’s Relationship to Truth, Social Status and Respect

Trump has a very specific understanding of truth as something that is made up rather

However, this phrase is hardly more than an empty shell that does not guide national security strategy by answering key questions, that would have to be addressed in a sound strategy (Friedman 2019).

than exists in its own right and just needs to be detected (Ninkovich 2018: 401). This tendency has been enhanced with the arrival and the use of social media that increased the fragmentation of the mass communication landscape and deteriorated the ability of information recipients to discern the truth value of news (Baum/Potter 2019: 750).

As a proself oriented individual Donald Trump is keenly aware of social hierarchy and status. He is preoccupied with his standing within these hierarchies. He is therefore obsessed with publicity and attaches high importance to maintaining a good reputation. He is keen on reports of his accomplishments and has a deep-seated fear of public embarrassment (Ashcroft 2016: 219; McAdams 2016; Wolf 2017: 101).

Trump’s status consciousness and demand of respect is an important driver of his treatment of both domestic and foreign opponents. He considers toughness as key and accommodation as leading to failure because it indicates a lack of resolve. He believes winning respect first and foremost requires to attack or counter-attack that aims at undermining the public reputation of opponents (Wolf 2017: 102).

Donald Trump’s obsession with winning and gaining respect shapes his thinking on foreign policy, too. He not only seeks respect for himself but requests other countries to respect the United States, too. He thus transforms an individual, personal need into one that pertains to U.S. foreign affairs. For a long time, he criticized that the status of the United States eroded internationally, that other states do not respect America, and that they therefore take advantage of it. The United States thus

lost its greatness because other countries took advantage when they did not pay their fair share of the costs of their protection by the U.S. Previous leaders contributed to the erosion of America’s status because they tolerated if not even encouraged such exploitative relationships (Wolf 2017: 102-103).

Trump therefore seeks to correct the false direction of U.S. foreign policy by reasserting the international status of America. Having stable and equitable relations with other countries requires that they pay respect to both the United States and him personally. Trump’s most important way to gaining international respect is winning victories in international conflicts. Previous presidents, he alleged, allowed the United States to be defeated time and again and to suffer international humiliations. Therefore, Trump seeks to change course by winning victories in international conflicts using strong resolve and tough decisions and actions (Wolf 2017: 105-106).³ His proself orientation lead to a foreign policy conduct that emphasizes confrontation over compromise. It also promotes a tendency to shake off the constraints of international organizations or multilateralism because they prevent the United States from winning victories and ultimately regain international respect and status.

Moreover, being victorious and winning in international conflicts requires the ability to keep score. Trump therefore needs a reference that supports keeping those scores and helps him to proof to supporters that the United States won a victory in a serious international contest. To meet this requirement Trump uses both statistical data and simple distinctions about how

³ For Trump an important side effect of winning international victories is domestic: it helps U.S. citizens and the nation as a whole to reestablish the lost national pride (Wolf 2017: 106). This means that for Trump a transactional approach

to international relations can generate national pride and thereby substitute exceptionalism as the source of both national pride and social cohesion.

victory or defeat are expressed in numbers. One important example is his use of trade statistics. He seriously believes that a positive balance of trade – higher exports than imports – is evidence for victory in conflicts over international trade. In turn, a negative balance of trade demonstrates defeat (Wolf 2017: 106-107). The combination of Trump’s proself orientation, his status consciousness, and his interest in winning is highly conducive to a conduct of foreign policy based on zero-sum thinking, bilateralism, and using a transactional approach.

One can find a latent inconsistency between Trump’s belief in status and status hierarchies in which the United States clearly should rank on top of the hierarchical order (Wolf 2017: 107), and the neorealist claim that the United States is just an ordinary country in anarchical international relations without formal hierarchies, to which Trump is perceived to subscribe, too (Schweller 2018). “America first” and “making America great again” are clear symbolic expressions of status consciousness and political aspirations of establishing status hierarchies in international relations. However, these elements of Trump’s political belief system are incompatible with neorealist theories of international relations. They point more towards hierarchies of empire or hegemony within a Westphalian state system than to formal equality among states as like-units. Reinhard Wolf argued that Trump is mainly interested in status and symbolic victories rather than in the material distribution of outcomes (Wolf 2017: 108). However, it is not always easy to separate the two. Victories in trade conflicts that Donald Trump envisions essentially mean a reversal of the negative trade balance of the United States. The effect of such a reversal would be a significant

redistribution of gains from trade among partners that are hardly symbolic only. Even if Trump’s transactional approach is justified by using arguments of status and symbolism its application will inevitably produce distributional effects.

Trump’s Understanding of Social Hierarchy

Trump’s status consciousness and claims of the United States to be positioned on the top of an international hierarchy deviates from the forms of empire and hegemony discussed above. His understanding of hierarchy is not based upon legitimacy through recognition or acceptance by other states. In his view there is no room for grand bargains or international organizations as basis for legitimate hegemonic leadership. It is also not primarily related to power as control of resources but to power as control of outcomes, i.e. structural power. According to Trump, the American status on top of the international hierarchy results from victorious outcomes of conflicts and is therefore a consequence of chains of interaction in zero-sum games. No theory of international relations nor historical descriptions of empire and hegemony have conceptualized or at least acknowledged this transactional understanding of international hierarchy.⁴ Scholars and practitioners therefore have to accept that Trump’s view of international relations does not follow their familiar understanding of international relations. Instead it is both eclectic and unique.

Another feature of Trump’s personality appears to be incompatible with his alleged adherence to neorealism. While it is true that his proself orientation facilitates a selfish approach to foreign policy that can be interpreted as neorealist self-help, his

⁴ E.g. there is no room for a transactional concept of hierarchy in David Lake’s recently updated elaboration (Lake 2018).

egoistical transactionalism is not just a Machiavellian tactic but driven by deep moral convictions about America not only deserving better but best (Hafner-Burton/Narang/ Rathbun 2019: 708; Wolf 2017: 108).

The Impact of Trump’s Personality on U.S. Foreign Affairs

In sum, an analysis of Donald Trump’s personality clearly shows his extraordinary difficulty of coping with opposition and loss of status and reputation on the one hand and his compulsive desire toward confrontation and victory on the other. To some, including Trump himself, his offensive style of constant confrontation and aggressiveness signals strong leadership qualities and a strong desire of winning in conflict situations. Trump’s supporters can perceive him as a leader who vigorously fights for their cause.

However, this view covers up a major weakness of both Trump’s personality and leadership qualities. In essence, he cannot effectively take external hits and come to terms with them internally. He cannot even defend himself without launching a counterattack. He considers the ability to take external hits and absorb them internally as a weakness that others would only exploit (Wolf 2017: 102, 107-108). He believes that external hits mean a loss of reputation and status that ultimately undermine the respect others need to pay to him. However, hit taking can be an extremely useful quality of strength and strong leadership particularly in relationships of high levels of interdependence. The ability to absorb criticisms, attacks, or losses can be a great source of strength because they increase independence and reduce sensitivity or vulnerability as defined by interdependence theorists. In German language showing an opponent that one can take a hit and shrug it off without succumbing to his will is called *Nehmerqualität* (hit taking quality). A

person possessing it can frustrate an opponent’s attacks because it is perceived as having no weak spots to exploit by hitting on them. Eventually, the opponent understands that continuous hitting will not generate any success and most likely will give it up. Yet, *Nehmerqualität* requires psychological strengths and personal qualities that Donald Trump does not seem to possess. They are not part of his personal leadership repertoire. These missing elements limit the range of tools available for conducting foreign affairs. He will therefore strongly tend towards externalization of adjustment pressures rather than absorb them by processing them internally. In this sense, his personality strongly correlates with the U.S. preference for externalization of adjustment costs. However, it is highly doubtful whether he can actually earn the respect of foreign societies or their leaders and conclude cooperative agreements with terms more advantageous to the United States. Foreign policy accomplishments require a far broader range of capabilities than putting on a strong aggressive show. Therefore, it is improbable that the term of the Trump presidency will go down in diplomatic history as an era of many foreign policy successes.

Donald Trump lacks several necessary personal traits such as epistemic motivation or instrumental empathy to develop and maintain an elaborate international order based upon strategic action. This lack partly explains why the administration is skeptical about international orders more generally. His proself orientation, status orientation, and preference for winning in the pursuit of relative gains explain the transactional approach to international relations of his administration as well as his short-term thinking in zero-sum games. All of these features are detrimental to order management.

To the very limited extent Trump seems to believe in order, his status consciousness

and his insistence that others respect him and the United States more generally point towards a loyalty view of relationships that are far more conducive to empire than liberal hegemony. Most importantly, Trump’s personal traits point towards a lack of recognition that legitimacy is a necessary requirement for international leadership and exercising authority. There is no room

in Trump’s belief system for the potential threats of a “Polanyi crisis.”

However, his personality greatly resonates with the views of his loyal supporters. While his personality undermines his international leadership qualifications, he is still a strong domestic leader because he is quite capable of mobilizing public support.

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