

The meaning of “America First” is in flux

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MAGA’s foreign policy and imperialism

Once people thought Donald Trump was at heart an isolationist or a “restrainer”, a kind of isolationist-lite. Air strikes in the Middle East during his first term could be chalked up to the neoconservatives around him. Then the president returned to office and attacked Venezuela, Nigeria, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Somalia and Yemen. He made a quixotic bid for Greenland, though appeared to ease up on that at the World Economic Forum in Davos this week. International-relations theorists now liken him to a 19th-century realist prowling for natural resources. Others see a man who relishes domination and the exercise of power for power’s sake.

Mr Trump operates by instinct, not ideology. He is petty and partial to seeing his name on buildings and maps. His yen for Greenland stems partly from the fact that he was passed over for a Nobel peace prize, and partly from his desire to rival Thomas Jefferson’s purchase of Louisiana. The island, he says, is essential for national security, and America needs to own it to defend it—a sentiment he expressed to the crowd in Davos like this: “Psychologically, who the hell wants to defend a licence agreement or a lease?” That his quest could torpedo NATO in the process is secondary. Yet for more methodical MAGA thinkers, that is a central project.

Indeed, Mr Trump’s flexibility belies the fact that within the MAGA movement there are cohering—and competing—ideologies about how America should exercise power in the world. J.D. Vance, his vice-president, is more serious about restraint and more contemptuous of European liberal democracies. Other advisers—Marco Rubio, Stephen Miller—reveal different reflexes still. They are worth scrutinising because they will outlast Mr Trump. Their ideas have a lineage and a future beyond the persona of the president.

“America First” once meant hawkishness towards China; contempt for multilateral organisations; and a disinterest in Ukraine that can look a lot like Russophilia. These are still important tenets. But now America First also means dominating the western hemisphere by smashing cartels, claiming Greenland’s rare-earth minerals and commandeering Venezuelan oil. This last piece is entirely new. During the campaign Mr Trump was very interested in people from Latin America who crossed the US-Mexico border, but not at all in Latin America itself, notes Julian Waller of George Washington University. In Europe the Trump administration increasingly wants to use its leverage to “reform” (ie, strong-arm) liberal governments to become more MAGA-fied.

Mr Trump says that America First means whatever he decides and his only constraint is his “own morality”. He has convictions: an antipathy to forever wars, nation-building, trade deficits and free-riding allies. But otherwise he is flexible. He wants to turn his back on Ukraine, but he would like to win a peace prize and not be perceived as a loser. He is impulsive: he bombed Islamist militants in Nigeria after watching a segment on Fox News about besieged Christians. His hold on the Republican party means his voters adapt to his inconsistencies.

Anyone searching for a more coherent worldview can look to his advisers. The National Security Strategy (NSS), released in December, articulated their priorities. The document was their attempt to justify their boss’s instincts and backfill an ideology, while also advancing their own pet causes. It contained two particularly remarkable statements of belief: the Trump

Corollary (later dubbed the Donroe Doctrine), which asserts American primacy in the western hemisphere, and a warning about Europe’s “civilisational erasure”.

The Donroe Doctrine had its first success in the ousting of Nicolás Maduro as president of Venezuela. The faces of that operation were Mr Rubio, the secretary of state, and Mr Miller, a hardline adviser. Mr Rubio is a traditional Republican and a son of Cuban émigrés. His interest in toppling communist dictatorships in the region and seeding democracy there is deep and personal. He calls to mind the hawkish evangelism of a neocon—which he was during his 14 years in the Senate.

The enemy in the mirror

Mr Miller’s interest in the western hemisphere is animated by immigration. At home he has masterminded the administration’s deportation machine, with its theatrics and supposed focus on criminals. This helps explain the Caribbean boat strikes and the designation of cartels as foreign terrorist organisations. Indeed the Venezuela campaign marked an “externalisation” of a domestic agenda that brings military might to drug and immigration enforcement, says Jennifer Kavanagh of Defence Priorities, a think-tank. The goal is domination everywhere, including in American cities.

After the release of the NSS some interpreted the Trump administration to be adopting a spheres-of-influence approach: American pre-eminence in the western hemisphere and letting China and Russia do as they please in their backyards. That is a misreading, says Patrick Porter of the University of Birmingham in Britain, since it would imply a mutual carve-up of the globe. In fact the Trump administration seems keen to project power elsewhere, especially in Asia.

Restrainers are frustrated. Last year the Trump administration secured a commitment from European countries to spend 5% of GDP on defence, to be achieved with some budget gimmickry. That is not a win, says Ms Kavanagh, a restrainer. Her camp wants America to leave Europe full stop. Sumantra Maitra, another analyst who is close to members of the Trump administration, argues for a “dormant” NATO where America is a “balancer of last resort” in Europe rather than a perpetual forward presence. A clear sign that America is taking that route would come if Mr Trump withdraws the 20,000 or so extra troops that Joe Biden sent to Europe, says Mr Maitra. He thinks meaningful burden-shifting would take at least ten years.

Meanwhile the Trump administration is setting conditions on American protection. Mr Vance sketched some of them out in a speech in Munich last year that was full of contempt for European governments. He said Europe would need to confront the “enemy within”, by which he meant woke elites who censor speech, support open borders and refuse to govern in coalition with far-right populists.

The NSS revisits these themes. It warns that Europe will be “unrecognisable” in 20 years unless it rights itself. After the release of the NSS, the State Department put a visa ban on a former EU commissioner and architect of the Digital Services Act, a European law mandating content moderation by tech firms. MAGA blames it for suppressing its viewpoints.

Mr Vance is the most committed MAGA thinker in the administration. He reflects the intellectual vibes of the new right. Their outlook is often influenced by Catholicism and can be deeply pessimistic and suffused with cultural anxiety. Nathan Pinkoski of the Centre for Renewing America, a new-right think-tank, says strategic rivalry with China crystallised an “identity crisis” among MAGA types, who saw a West enfeebled by mass migration and wokery. “We don’t even have a sense of what we’re for anymore as a civilisation,” he says.

“If we want to be able to contend with our geopolitical rivals, we have to sort out our own problems.” He anticipates an aggressive use of sanctions and other economic tools against Europeans whenever “we perceive they are drifting away from their civilisational heritage”.

There are contradictions here, which MAGA has yet to clear up. Antagonising Europeans will not help in the great-power contest with China. America cannot walk away from European defence and simultaneously compel Europeans to govern in the MAGA mould. “Burden-shifting and civilisational politics don’t go hand in hand,” says Mr Maitra, who calls advocates of the second approach “no different” than the neocons they deride. His prediction is a struggle that will “essentially engulf” MAGA. It is easy to understand what Democrats are for, he says. They are internationalists. The other side? Unresolved. ■