

Trumpism, US Foreign Policy and International Relations Theory

Monday 21 June 2021 16:00 (1h 30m)

Panel description:

This panel aims to explore how the theories of International Relations (IR) can make sense of the Trump phenomenon. While the rise of Donald Trump to the US presidency and his notorious rants against the establishment's foreign policy and the liberal international order have received substantial scholarly and public attention in the last years, there have been very few attempts to study Trump's foreign policy from the perspective of IR theory. The contributions of this panel examine how different IR theories enable us to understand and explain Trump's foreign policy rhetoric, style and practices. To what extent, does the Trump phenomenon pose a challenge to IR theories and its core assumptions and categories? What are the implications of Trump for the theorisation of US foreign policy? How would different IR theories evaluate Trump's foreign policy?

Paper abstracts:

1)The irrational actor: the Trump administration, the fracturing of US foreign policy identity, and the challenge for IR theory

Ruth Deyermund, King's College London

This paper will consider the challenge posed by the fragmented and inconsistent nature of Trump's foreign policy to IR theory, considering the case of the administration's approach to NATO, to NATO member states, and to broader questions of European security. It will argue that traditional IR theoretical approaches struggle to explain Trump's foreign policy because Trump's personal approach does not appear to be informed by traditional conceptions of foreign policy interests or identity, and because other individuals, groups, and organisations within the Trump administration hold widely differing and frequently changing positions. Constructivist approaches allow scholars to make sense of the individual voices in Trump's foreign policy –how they articulate both specific policies and how those policies relate to actor understandings of US national identity –but characteristics of the Trump administration set significant limits even here. The two most significant of these are the instability of administration membership –key foreign and security policy positions have experienced a high turnover of personnel –and the lack of transparency, including documentation, on foreign policy matters. The paper argues that the Trump administration's foreign policy thus poses fundamental conceptual and empirical challenges for IR scholars of all theoretical positions, and for the possibility of thinking about a coherent US national identity narrative in this period.

2)Understanding Trump's foreign policy and its rejection of liberalism

Matthew Hill, Liverpool John Moores University

The American Mission is a framework that has driven the US since the founding days of the republic. Liberty and the pursuit of happiness are universal values to repeat around the world. In contemporary times, this longstanding promotion of liberal values is explained through the language and practice of liberal internationalism and democracy promotion. With the foreign policy failures of the Bush administration alongside the financial and economic crises, the Obama administration limited democracy promotion's use as a suitable tool to acquiring its foreign policy objectives. This paper examines democracy promotion at the conceptual, rhetoric and implementation levels and suggests that this liberal internationalist and democratic peace theory-inspired foreign policy framework was further dismantled by the Trump administration. Dismantled to such an extent that liberal ideology was rejected in favour of a populist, unilateral and economic driven nationalism. This paper also questions the long-term implications of its rejection during these last few years and suggests that the Biden administration looks likely to step-back from this full-scale rejection.

3)„A City Upon A Hill“: Paradoxes of American Exceptionalism and Restraint from a Neo-Classical Realism Perspective

Cornelia Baci, University of Konstanz

US exceptionalism and a foreign policy of restraint has acerbated under Donald Trump. Defensive, offensive realists or institutionalists define restraint quite distinctly. Offensive realists define restraint as an exit from a hegemonic order because of the costs associated with it and because a rules-based international order is utopic given the anarchical structure of the international system and faults of international institutions (Mearsheimer 2018, 2019). Institutionalists define restraint as renouncing at hegemony for participating in a rule-based multipolar international order, in which restraint is associated with leadership transformation and seeking to shape a world order via engagement and commitment in multilateral institutions (Ikenberry 2011). However, these approaches seem to lack theoretical depth needed to explain political decisions during Donald Trump. To fill this gap, I propose neo-classical realism to study American exceptionalism and restraint during the mandate of Donald Trump. I argue that, first US exit from important international agreements can be explained by international-level variables, such as competition with China. Second, I argue that domestic factors also influence Trump's political preferences, and this is demonstrated by the "America First" programme. Third, I argue that individual-level variables also play a role in policy-decisions of illiberal leaders –this was demonstrated by Trumps calling in of the military in response to the riots in the aftermath of the death of George Floyd. Trump demonstrated avidity for power exertion in the detriment of the Constitution and demands for justice. This paper adds a theoretical distinction to neo-classical realism, by demonstrating the importance of individual-level variables in policy decisions. At policy level, the findings show that American exceptionalism has not ended, but it transformed. It also reveals new paradoxes, related to the aspiring role of world leader (over China) and restraint, while simultaneously opening an interesting puzzle pertaining to the role of EU as an emerging pole of power.

4)Right-wing Populism, Foreign Policy and Folk Realism: Trumpism and US Foreign Policy

Thorsten Wojczewski, King's College London

The apparent global rise of populism poses a challenge to International Relations Theory as populist concepts such as 'the people' do not readily fit into the established analytical categories and assumptions of mainstream theories. This paper discusses these challenges in relation to (neo)realism and proposes a re-conceptualization of (neo)realist theory as folk realism as theoretical framework to capture the main features of right-wing populist foreign policy. It argues that folk realism constitutes a crude variant of realism which (1)foregrounds the notion of popular sovereignty, (2)seeks to appeal to the common-sense and fears of 'ordinary' people, (3)offers simple and swift solutions to international problems, and (4)propagates the deliberate transgression of the conventions of diplomacy and established tenets of a state's foreign policy. The paper applies this theoretical framework to the case of the United States and examines the impact of populism on US foreign policy under Donald Trump as well as the broader implications of right-wing populism for foreign policy-making.

5)Why American grand strategy has changed: international constraint, generational shift, and the return of realism

Nicholas Kitchen, University of Surrey

From Clinton to Bush to Obama to Trump: the personalities, rhetoric, and policies of Presidents charged with defining US foreign policy in the post-Cold War era could hardly appear more different. Yet recent treatments of American grand strategy have sought to highlight a lack of debate about grand strategy, and to emphasize groupthink and "habit" within the US foreign policy establishment. This article argues that US grand strategy has changed, and suggests that those who prioritize continuities rely on an overly restrictive definition of grand strategy. Employing policy paradigms as an analytical framework, this paper finds significant variation in US grand strategy across the four post-Cold War presidencies. Where the variation between Clinton and George W. Bush's presidencies can be explained by differing strategic ideas among American foreign policy-making elites, a trend towards less active hegemonic management running through the Obama and Trump presidencies is more structural in nature, reflecting both international constraints and generational change.

Track Classification: US Foreign Policy Working Group