

DONALD TRUMP AND THE NEW JACKSONIANS

A resurgent Jacksonianism and ‘America First’ unilateralism could lead to a new US game plan in the Asia Pacific, argue

David Martin Jones and Nicholas Khoo

Visiting Berlin last November, departing US President Barack Obama hoped his successor Donald Trump would ‘not simply take a realpolitik approach’ to Russia.¹ It came as something of a shock to hear Obama utter the word ‘realpolitik,’ given its associations with a realist understanding of statecraft. International lawyers and the progressive university professoriat across the Anglosphere eschew its use, preferring instead a political vocabulary of international norms, global justice and human rights. It is these values that the European Union, which Obama considers ‘one of the greatest achievements in the world’, espouses.²

Somewhat problematically, such values are no longer shared by the majority of American and European voters. The revolt of the masses that Brexit announced, and Trump’s election reaffirmed, has shaken the belief of a transnational elite in regional and international institutions transforming the world in a more equal, just, diversity aware, border free and environmentally conscious way. Trump’s election campaign trashed this progressive faith and demonstrated how comprehensively the mainstream media failed to understand the popular discontent that Trump so effectively articulated.

Central to Trump’s triumph was his ability to channel what Walter Russell Mead identifies as the Jacksonian school of thought in US politics. In his seminal 2001 book *Special Providence*, Mead outlined how four schools of thought, associated with US statesmen Woodrow Wilson, Alexander Hamilton, Thomas Jefferson and Andrew Jackson,

have shaped American foreign policy.³ Wilsonians focus on values and profess faith in human rights and international institutions whilst Hamiltonians prefer economics to values and consider it ‘folly to expect or calculate upon real favors from nation to nation’.⁴ Since the end of the Cold War, these prevailing schools of thought in US diplomacy promoted a global liberal institutional order—the former in terms of liberal values, the latter in terms of market economics. By contrast, Jeffersonians advocate a distinctly minimalist foreign policy along American libertarian lines and steer clear of intervention overseas, whilst Jacksonians evince a populist nationalism only intermittently concerned with foreign policy. Yet once galvanised, they are not easily dissuaded from a chosen course of action.⁵



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Of these intellectual traditions, Jacksonianism expresses an aspect of the US political psyche least represented in the mainstream American media and amongst the professoriat, who deplore rather than comprehend it—hence the somewhat hysterical overreaction to Trumpism. What does this tradition involve and how will it affect US foreign and trade policy and its commitment to international institutions?

Jacksonians at home

Andrew Jackson, the seventh President of the United States (1829–37), understood—like his near contemporary Thomas Jefferson—that the authority of the president derived from the will of the free people. A southern outsider, Jackson emphasised popular accountability and despised the East Coast banking and business establishment. In contrast with the later 20th century internationalist Wilsonian tradition that informed the thinking of the Clinton and Obama Democrats as well as Republican George W. Bush's neo-conservatism, Jacksonians are populist, patriotic and exceptionalist. They view the United States as 'unique not universal'⁶ and, like Trump, they put 'America first'.

Jackson founded the Democrat party, yet over time Jacksonianism shaped the presidencies of Eisenhower, Nixon and Reagan. Indeed, by the latter half of the 20th century, the tradition had assumed a Republican character. It is ignored at peril, as it has a habit of throwing up transformational leaders like Reagan, who characteristically asserted 'there is no such thing as left or right. There is only up or down'.⁷

Jacksonianism then is not so much an ideology or a political movement as it is the expression of the social and cultural values of a sector of the US public, a community of feeling wielded politically as an instrument of power. Mead contends that this community remains the most important in American politics.⁸ It originated in the values of the 18th century Scots-Irish folk community of Greater Appalachia, but the mentality spread to later migrant cultures. In the process it created a unique American settler myth based on robust individualism and equality. Its code emphasises self-reliance, self-improvement, respect for family, equality of dignity and rights, courage and a maverick disregard for

risk and fiscal probity in business matters.⁹ Personal honour and reputation within the community are sacrosanct. As J.D. Vance observes in *Hillbilly Elegy*, the Scots-Irish hillbilly has 'two Gods, Jesus Christ and the United States of America'.¹⁰ It is this community that now evinces deep scepticism towards the Washington establishment and their 'global cosmopolitan ideology'. They consider the system 'rigged against us'.¹¹

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From this perspective, government has always been a necessary evil. Consequently, the Jacksonian mentality distrusts big government and professional elites, whom they suspect pervert American interests in favour of alien, progressive values. This explains the utter disdain of Trump and his chief strategist and 'alter ego' Steve Bannon for political correctness.¹² It is a community predisposed, as the American historian Richard Hofstadter observed in the 1960s, to the 'paranoid style' in politics.¹³ Such suspicious minds require an outsider popular hero like 'Old Hickory', 'The Gipper' or 'The Donald' to restore government to its proper function. Problems of foreign or domestic policy might be complex, but Jacksonian solutions are often simple. Gordian knots must be cut. Government should reflect the will of the majority, promote the economic and political well-being of the folk community, and not be hedged about with administrative checks and balances. Hence the popular support for Trump and his angry promises to 'drain the swamp' and 'get things done'—by executive order if necessary.

In economic terms, policy should look after the American people, not banks and financial institutions too big to fail. Originally a party formed from small farmers, Jacksonians are instinctively protectionist. They may be persuaded into trade agreements, but they have to be assured they are in the interest of mainstream America, not offshoring transnational conglomerates.

As Steve Bannon observed of Trump's inaugural address (which he wrote), 'I don't think we've had

a speech like that since Andrew Jackson came to the White House. But you could see it was very Jacksonian. It's got a deep, deep root of patriotism'. The new patriotism 'will buy American and hire American'. 'Everything', Bannon contends, is related

to jobs. . . I'm the guy pushing a trillion-dollar infrastructure plan. With negative interest rates throughout the world, it's the greatest opportunity to rebuild everything . . . We're just going to throw it up against the wall and see if it sticks. It will . . . be greater than the Reagan revolution—conservatives, plus populists, in an economic nationalist movement.¹⁴

Globalisation, according to Bannon, has 'gutted' the American working class and in the process created a smugly meritocratic, cosmopolitan upper class that deplored the folk community whilst ignoring its economic travails. Assuming office, Trump therefore ditched the elite-driven multilateral Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) with the stroke of a pen. Future trade deals will instead be bilateral and designed to secure US national interests.¹⁵ The UK is now one of the first in line, after having been relegated towards the back of the queue by Obama for daring to contemplate leaving the EU in the lead-up to last year's Brexit referendum.

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Jacksonians abroad

The new Jacksonianism will have geopolitical consequences, especially for Europe and the Asia Pacific. What might they involve?

Patriotic at home, Jacksonians are implacably realist abroad. The Jacksonian school is the one most clearly aligned with a European *realpolitik* tradition, which Obama's Secretary of State, John Kerry, regularly disparaged.¹⁶ Jacksonians consider Wilsonian international moralism impossible

because human nature is corrupt. Interstate relations are implicitly Hobbesian and conflict the default position. They thus have little faith in international law or international institutions. Rather than normative commitments to promote democracy, human rights or free trade, Jacksonians are pragmatists not evangelists abroad.

Concerned with US honour and 'inspired by patriotism',¹⁷ Jacksonians are, of course, not averse to using force to defend American interests. They favour a strong military and if American security is threatened, believe that war must be fought with all available means. As Trump avers: 'If America fights, it must only fight to win'.¹⁸ However, Jacksonians are not 'armed missionaries' or world policemen. They have no interest in nation-building, regime change or exporting democracy. Trump has repeatedly castigated the foreign policy establishment for the failed US military interventions abroad and 'continued losses at war' since the end of the Cold War, and vowed in his inauguration speech that 'we will not impose our way of life on anyone'.

Jacksonians also evince what Walter A. McDougall identified as a unilateralist tendency in US foreign policy that deplores 'entangling alliances'.¹⁹ They share this suspicion of 'interweaving our destiny' with 'foreign nations' with both Jeffersonian and Hamiltonian schools of thought who similarly eschew 'compromising our peace and prosperity in the toils of European ambition'. In fact, the 20th century Wilsonian faith in liberal internationalism, progressive imperialism and global meliorism diverges from what McDougall contends is 'the genuine US tradition dating from Washington's time' and the old testament of US foreign policy.²⁰ From this perspective, America represents a promised land rather than a crusader state. But both old and new foreign policy testaments, as McDougall shows, bestow America with millennial—and for Jacksonians sometimes apocalyptic—purpose.²¹

Unilateralism will have consequences for both NATO and the European 'consortium', which Trump's team considers has for too long enjoyed a free security ride. Trump wants more defence spending, especially from NATO partners, and a greater focus on fighting terrorism. He has also questioned the unconditional nature of Article

V—whereby an attack on one NATO member is an attack on all—as this could ‘entangle’ the US in confrontation with Russia over NATO expansion to the East.

Unilateralism, rather than Obamian progressive multilateralism, will shape the US attitude not only to Europe but also to Russian irredentism and China’s rise. Trump considers that ‘having a good relationship with Russia is a good thing, not a bad thing,’ and thinks a ‘reset’ with Putin based on ‘shared interests’ entirely ‘possible.’²² They share a desire to destroy a common foe—Islamic State—and stabilise the Middle East as well as preventing Iran and North Korea from acquiring nuclear weapons.²³ Trump has also articulated a much tougher stance on China than any post-Cold War era president.²⁴

As great powers, China and Russia obviously stand out for Jacksonians. Under the Obama administration, US relations with China and Russia reached an impasse. While the US engaged in a Wilsonian pursuit of trade globalisation combined with liberal democratic value promotion, these revisionist powers implemented those parts of the liberal international agenda they considered economically and politically congenial whilst rejecting those features they found detrimental to their national interests. Their role in the post-Cold War globalisation story and its effect upon the new American unilateral reaction bears careful consideration.

International norms and the revenge of the revisionist powers

Global rules like those embodied in the World Trade Organisation (WTO) that China joined in 2001, or the United Nations’ Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) supporting freedom of navigation, facilitated China’s economic reform and its testosterone-fuelled growth after the Asian Financial Crisis. China ratified UNCLOS in 1996. However, in July 2012 it announced that its control of Woody Island in the Paracel Islands entitled it to jurisdiction over much of the South China Sea. When, in July 2016, an international tribunal ruled that this occupation contravened UNCLOS, China dismissed it as ‘. . . nothing more than a

piece of waste paper [that] cannot be enforced.’²⁵ In a similar vein, China has often played fast and loose with WTO rules, manipulating its currency, subsidising exports and imposing import tariffs in order to bolster the power of the ruling party and a Sinic version of economic nationalism.²⁶

Analogously, Russia has used its status as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to veto resolutions that it felt undermined international law and state sovereignty. Between 1991 and 2003, Russia opposed US efforts to use force against both Saddam Hussein’s Iraq and the Slobodan Milosevic regime in Serbia. Yet Moscow reacts unilaterally when it considers its own security threatened. Thus, in February 2014, Russia responded to the overthrow of the pro-Russian Viktor Yanukovych regime in Ukraine by violating its neighbour’s sovereignty and aiding the pro-Russian, anti-Kiev opposition in Eastern Ukraine, culminating with the annexation of Crimea.

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In negotiating a path to address the rising power of China and the relative decline of Russia, the new ‘America First’ unilateralism will chart a course that eschews international norms and multilateral trade or environmental agreements antithetical to US national interests. Rather than trying to convert illiberal regimes to liberal norms, Trump will employ a case-by-case, ‘art of the deal’ approach to outstanding international problems. Such a transactional perspective looks to a convergence of interests rather than values, and seeks to use US leverage more effectively than in recent times.

In this context, Nixon’s Cold War diplomacy is particularly instructive. Assuming the presidential office in 1969, Nixon faced a war of attrition in Vietnam, a resurgent Soviet Union, and hostile relations with Mao’s China. His response reflected the *realpolitik* statecraft associated with his National Security Adviser, Henry Kissinger.

Nixon and Kissinger made an unprecedented and successful opening to China. The Sino-US rapprochement put pressure upon the Soviet Union, and enabled a US withdrawal from Vietnam on better terms than the ‘progressive imperialist’²⁷ Democratic administrations of the previous decade could secure. Nixon described the Sino-American rapprochement of 1972 and the SALT I accords between Washington and Moscow as ‘big plays.’ They sowed the seeds of doubt and fear of abandonment in the minds of the Vietnamese politburo. Engendering uncertainty confirmed the tactical value of transactional calculation, enabling the US to regain the initiative in the Cold War.

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As in the Nixon era, contemporary US policy requires ‘big plays’ to retake the initiative in world politics. While Wilsonian internationalists look at China and Russia and see threats to liberal norms and institutions, American realists see the global picture differently. Since they have little faith in international law, they are neither shocked nor surprised by self-serving international conduct. For latter-day Jacksonians, the way to deal with the revenge of revisionist powers is no mystery. In an anarchical international system where the advancement of national interest by hard and soft power prevails, geographical proximity and historical animosity means that China and Russia recognise the potential threat that each represents to the other. China competes with Russia in Central Asia, but the current US and European backed sanctions regime—now up for negotiation by Trump’s team—advantages China whilst isolating Russia.

In the post-liberal geopolitical environment, Jacksonians have evidently identified a convergence of interests between Russia and the US over Islamist terrorism and a rising and assertive China. Circumstances and ideologies change, but interests do not. A pragmatic American unilateralism may

therefore favour reversing the Nixon policy, playing the Russian card to counter a rising China. Indeed, Henry Kissinger has advised Trump’s transition team on the possibility of ‘a grand bargain with Russia’.²⁸ Ultimately, as Kissinger notes, Trump’s relationship with China will ‘be most critical for peace and progress in the world’.²⁹ Yet there are few things that would concern Chinese strategists in Zhongnanhai more than a US-Russian rapprochement. What might this entail for the Asia Pacific?

Trump’s Northeast Asia cards

A prospective Russian-US rapprochement could find a receptive audience in Northeast Asia. China’s difficult relations with Japan and South Korea have already created tensions ripe for manipulation.

In the East China Sea, the Senkaku island chain occupied by Japan, but claimed by China, has long been a source of contention. Tension escalated after the Japanese government nationalised three of the eight islands in September 2012. Beijing considered this an affront to Chinese sovereignty. On 23 November 2013, China declared an Air Defense Identification Zone over the East China Sea. The US, Japan and South Korea challenged the declaration. Japan subsequently decided to extend its rivalry with China into Southeast Asia, supplying the Philippine and Vietnamese navies with patrol vessels and providing ‘capacity building assistance to coastal nations’,³⁰ moves calculated ‘to show China that it doesn’t own the sea’.³¹

China has also progressively alienated South Korea. Sino-South Korean relations are at their lowest ebb since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1992. After North Korea conducted its fourth nuclear test in January 2016, followed by a test-fired ballistic missile a month later, South Korea formally announced talks with the United States to deploy a Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system. The People’s Republic considers THAAD a litmus test of US intentions. As Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi declared, ‘the deployment of the THAAD system by the United States goes far beyond the defense need of the Korean peninsula’.³²

However, China has, despite some equivocation, failed to restrain its alliance partner North Korea

and its intemperate provocation of South Korea and Japan in the face of Obama's policy of 'strategic patience'. In April and June 2016, North Korea conducted intermediate range ballistic missile tests. Compounding matters, on 5 September Pyongyang test fired three medium range missiles that fell within Japan's Air Defence Identification Zone. Four days later, it conducted its fifth nuclear test, prompting the US to announce its intention to deploy THAAD 'as soon as possible'.³³ Yet rather than acknowledge South Korea and Japan's existential concerns, Beijing instead contends that Seoul has adopted an anti-China stance. Chinese intransigence, coupled with its failure to contain the Pyongyang regime, afford an opportunity both for the US and a more Asia Pacific-oriented Russia to check its influence in Northeast Asia. Significantly, new Defence Secretary James Mattis's first overseas visit was to Seoul and Tokyo to reassure both countries of the importance of their alliances and to 'deepen three way security ties'.³⁴ His indications of closer US-Japan ties, however, failed to deter Pyongyang from symbolically test firing another ballistic missile into the Sea of Japan during Japanese Prime Minister Abe's visit to Washington in mid-February.

Closer to home, China's treatment of Taiwan as a 'renegade province' has perennially troubled US-China relations. An unforeseen consequence of Nixon's recognition of the PRC, Taiwan lost its seat at the United Nations together with international diplomatic recognition after 1971. As Taiwan evolved in the 1990s into one of the few developed representative democracies in the Asia Pacific, the Democratic Progressive Party pushed for Taiwan's international recognition, a move Beijing refuses to countenance. Shortly after his election, Trump raised the stakes by questioning the one China policy,³⁵ only to reverse his stance in a telephone conversation with President Xi in February.³⁶ In the Bush and Obama years, China took for granted its natural right to both greater China and evolving regional hegemony. Trump will be more unpredictable with regards to the security implications of the stalled Obama pivot. This will be particularly evident in Southeast Asia.³⁷

China, the US and raising the ante in Southeast Asia

The irrelevance of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) to regional security renders Southeast Asia and the dispute over the South China Sea increasingly volatile. Both Hillary Clinton and Obama viewed the multilateral TPP, and the regional good citizenship afforded by ASEAN and the East Asian Summit, central to the US pivot to contain China's influence and restrict its burgeoning grip over the South China Sea.

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Trump's decision to cancel the TPP seemed, to his liberal critics, to hand 'the keys to the global economy' to China³⁸—a view Xi Jinping happily reinforced at Davos in January as he condemned, without apparent irony, those who 'bend the [WTO] rules as they see fit'.³⁹ Such criticism misses the point. Realist as opposed to liberal political economy assumes that bilateral agreements provide the larger state with greater leverage, particularly if they are also the major security provider as the US is in both Southeast and Northeast Asia.⁴⁰ The new Jacksonians clearly prefer bilateral free trade deals. Rather than the TPP, the new US trade realism will seek 'good deals with lots of countries'.⁴¹ According to Treasury Secretary Steve Mnuchin and Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross, this is the future of US regional economic diplomacy.

In trade realism terms, the US is playing catch up with China. The noodle bowl of Asian Free Trade Agreements throws geopolitics into focus. China considers the ASEAN-led Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)—which amalgamates all ASEAN's FTAs with regional partners into a coherent whole—integral to its ambitious 'Belt and Road' initiative. It could prove a significant boon to the integration of Southeast Asia as a single market facilitating a free flow of goods and services.

However, Xi Jinping's dream to integrate the smaller ASEAN economies into a Sinocentric regional production network has geopolitical trade-offs. China's proactive economic diplomacy imbricates its neighbours in a web of incentives that increase their dependence and raises the ante for calling China over 'either territorial or economic disputes'.⁴² China therefore offers both carrots and sticks to its weaker neighbors. Those who resist its power, like Vietnam, are excluded from its bounty. Those who pay tribute are rewarded.

In this context, the Duterte regime in the Philippines quickly realised the stakes involved in taking China to the (non-binding) UNCLOS over China's historic claim to 90% of the South China Sea. Manila has since backpeddled from the tribunal's finding that declared China had no legal basis for its claim, as well as its formerly close ties with the US.

The Wilsonian propensity to tie trade and military support to the promotion of democracy and human rights unhinged the Obama pivot. It is not a mistake that the Trump administration will repeat.

This not only illustrates how China adapts international legal decisions to its interests, but also demonstrates the unpredictable manner in which smaller states respond to multilateral and international legal regimes. This is especially the case in Southeast Asia, where insecure ASEAN states evince little faith in international law and resent lectures on human rights violations from former 'colonial powers'. Regional strongmen like Philippine President Duterte and Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak, as well as the Thai military junta, have bristled over hectoring on human rights by successive US administrations and unwarranted interference in their sometimes corrupt domestic politics, and have thus moved closer to Beijing.

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mistake that the Trump administration will repeat. Pragmatic unilateralism and better interpersonal relations, as the ASEAN way requires, will more effectively secure US interests in Southeast Asia and across the ill-defined boundary 'where America stopped and Asia began' than the promotion of international legal axioms.⁴³ Obama's TPP might 'be dead in the water' but the alternative of the RCEP, initiated by ASEAN but effectively led by China, is not without its downsides—as the more advanced ASEAN economies acknowledge.⁴⁴

After the shock

The Trump presidency assumed from its inception a unilateralist character with strong Jacksonian undertones. This means a check on unfettered globalisation at home as well as a retreat from the abstract promotion of liberal values abroad. Instead, US foreign policy will pursue American interests. From this perspective, ambivalence towards the EU, an opening to Russia, and pragmatism in Asia—together with a tougher transactional approach to China—represent the lineaments of a *realpolitik* game plan. It could in time solve the US' geopolitical predicament and become the new international 'norm'. Assuming, of course, that Trump's evident narcissism and Bannon's preoccupation with the inevitability of war with China do not get the better of them,⁴⁵ the world could return to a more multipolar system of nation-states, with less emphasis on international institutions and less reliance on American hegemony.

Endnotes

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