THE HILL

What Biden Can Borrow from Trump's "America First"

Jerry Haar

"America First", the slogan, theme, battle cry, and mantra of the Trump administration, will be jettisoned along with "Make America Great Again" and "Keep America Great" with the president and his entourage on January 20th. "America First", however, is more than a slogan; it also embodies policy prescriptions, ones which merit attention even now as president-elect Biden prepares to take office.

There is a tendency for a newly elected leader to completely discard the contributions of one's predecessor. It is human nature for a "new sheriff in town" to mark his or her territory and take actions to install change, throwing out the old and ushering in the new.

Be that as it may, a thoughtful, astute, and secure leader will dispassionately ask: "Might there be something in the legacy of my predecessor that deserves a second look?"

Four areas of the Trump administration's "America First" agenda are ones that should be reassessed by the new administration.

Immigration. Policies that advocate restrictions on legal immigration, ending DACA, reducing the number of asylum seekers and cutting back H-1B visas for highly skilled technical workers are anti-immigrant, cruel and economically foolish. The Cato Institute calculates it would cost over $60 billion to deport the 750,000 people protected by DACA, and lead to a $280 billion reduction in economic growth over the next decade.[1] As for H-1B workers, their presence increases wages for *all* workers in their community and spurs significant growth in both productivity and patenting.[2] The Trump administration has wisely supported a merit-based system, similar to Canada's and Australia's, where priority is given to immigrants with the talents and skills needed to boost national competitiveness. A Biden administration should seriously consider implementing such an immigration policy.

Trade. President Trump treats trade as a zero-sum game. He does not refer to himself as "Tariff Man" for nothing. The U.S. has increased tariffs to $79 billion, twice that of 2 years earlier, and imposed unwarranted levies on foreign steel and aluminum to protect national security. Based on 2019 import levels, U.S. and retaliatory tariffs currently impact over $460 billion of imports and exports, and President Trump's tariffs are increasing annual consumer costs by roughly $57

[1] https://www.cato.org/blog/economic-fiscal-impact-repealing-daca
[2] https://thehill.com/opinion/immigration/504296-dont-cut-h-1b-visas-increase-them

billion.[3] To note, American consumers paid $817,000 in higher prices for every job created in the washing machine industry.[4] His withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership was not only non-sensical but has harmed our competitiveness with China. On the other hand, the upside of his America First trade policies is the aggressive enforcement of U.S. trade law (given the numerous barriers to U.S. trade in goods and services by many nations), the much needed revision of NAFTA to the now USMCA, and the breakthrough agreement with the EU to increase exports.[5] The new administration would be wise to continue tough—but also fair—policies and actions on trade, both bilateral and multilateral.

Alliances. No U.S. president in memory has so deprecated multilateralism as Donald Trump. In addition to the aforementioned Trans-Pacific Partnership, the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, and the Iran Nuclear Agreement, the president's troop withdrawals from Syria and Afghanistan are other manifestations of unilateralism and isolationism, as well. On the other hand, Trump's complaints about NATO are legitimate. In 2014, NATO members agreed to target spending 2 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) on defense, although the contributions remain voluntary. In 2017, only the U.S. and four other countries reached the 2 percent target.[6] As for the U.N., that organization does not particularly inspire faith in multilateralism, with China and Russia occupying seats on the Human Rights Council and UNICEF partnering with terror-tied groups in the West Bank and Gaza.[7] However, a multilaterally re-engaged United States can manifest a muscular posture with a seat at the table rather than in isolation.

China. China has been President Trump's nemesis since Day One, adamant that their extensive unfair trade practices, have resulted in a huge and growing trade deficit for the U.S. Of all America First policies, the ones dealing with China are those most in synch with Democrats. Trump's tariffs imposed on China are specifically in response to their forced technology transfer, intellectual property theft, and their chronically abusive trade practices. U.S. tariffs, however, triggered retaliation by China with tariffs on 70 billion of U.S. goods.[8] This resulted in the administration having to pay $28 billion in subsidies to U.S. farmers injured by lost export sales to China.[9] Tough policies on China will surely constitute a major thrust of the Biden administration; however, they would be wise to keep in mind that: China is our third largest export market; trade with China reduces prices Americans pay for consumer tradables, U.S. companies in China sell hundreds of billions of dollars of goods and services there; and China's ownership of $1 trillion in U.S. Treasury bills keeps interest rates low.[10]

---

[3] https://www.americanactionforum.org/research/the-total-cost-of-trumps-new-tariffs/#ixzz6d3WnEn9u.

[4] https://www.brookings.edu/policy2020/votervital/did-trumps-tariffs-benefit-american-workers-and-national-security/.

[5] https://ustr.gov/sites/default/files/2020_National_Trade_Estimate_Report.pdf.

[6] https://www.cnbc.com/2018/07/11/trumps-nato-criticism-is-valid-europe-isnt-spending-enough-on-def.html

[7] https://www.ngo-monitor.org/reports/unicef-opt-continues-its-partnership-with-terror-tied-groups-and-other-disturbing-developments/

[8] https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/19/business/economy/trump-china-trade-war-farmers.html

[9] https://fortune.com/2020/10/23/trump-debate-china-farm-subsidies-pays/ .

[10].https://www.mercatus.org/bridge/commentary/why-trade-china-good-america;
https://www.aeaweb.org/articles?id=10.1257/aeri.20180358&&from=f ;

From its bipartisan isolationist roots in the interwar period (1918-1939), "America First" has morphed into a nationalist-protectionist bastion of unilateralism. Yet most of the world's major problems and threats, such as terrorism, pandemics, nuclear proliferation, the environment, drugs, and human and arms trafficking are borderless and require multilateral cooperation. Hopefully, the incoming Biden administration will put America first—always—but be mindful of the need to collaborate judiciously with other nations across the globe when warranted.

Jerry Haar is a business professor at Florida International University and a Global Fellow of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, D.C.