



By: Richard Haass

The Trump Doctrine – not to allow anti-democratic behavior to get in the way of doing business



US President Donald Trump's second administration is barely four months old, but already there are signs of an emerging foreign policy doctrine. And like so much else about his presidency, it represents a striking departure from the past.

Doctrines play an important role in American foreign policy. With the Monroe Doctrine, announced in 1823, the United States asserted that it would be the preeminent power in the Western Hemisphere and would prevent other countries from establishing competitive strategic positions in the region. At the outset of the Cold War, the Truman Doctrine pledged US support to countries fighting Communism and Soviet-backed subversion.

More recently, the Carter Doctrine signaled that the US would not stand by if an outside force sought to gain control of the oil-rich Persian Gulf region. The Reagan Doctrine promised assistance to anti-Communist, anti-Soviet forces and countries. George W. Bush's Freedom Doctrine, among other things, made clear that neither terrorists nor those who harbored them would be safe from attack.

What these and other doctrines have in common is that they signal to multiple audiences critical US interests and what the US is prepared to do to advance them. Doctrines are intended to reassure friends and allies, deter actual or would-be enemies, galvanize the bureaucracy tasked with national security matters, and educate the public.

"Look the other way" doctrine

Although no Trump Doctrine has been explicitly put forward, one has begun to emerge all the same. You could call it the "look the other way" doctrine, the "see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil" doctrine, or the "none of our business" doctrine.

Whatever the label, the doctrine signals that the US will no longer try to influence or react to how countries conduct themselves within their borders.

The administration has refrained from criticizing Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan for **arresting** his principal political opponent, Israel's Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu for repeated attempts to weaken the country's judiciary, or Hungary's long-serving prime minister, Viktor Orbán, who has steadily undermined democratic institutions there.

While Trump has disparaged the foreign policy of Russian President Vladimir Putin and the economic policy of Chinese President Xi Jinping, he has not made an issue of either leader's repression of his own people.

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The Trump administration has also cut back or **dismantled** many of the instruments, including Voice of America, the Agency for International Development, and the National Endowment for Democracy, long used to promote civil society and democratic movements around the world.

The closest there was to a public **articulation** of the new doctrine came in Saudi Arabia on May 13.

Trump spoke with admiration of what he described as that country's great transformation, adding it "has not come from Western interventionists ... giving you lectures on how to live and how to govern your own affairs ... In recent years, far too many American presidents have been afflicted with the notion that it's our job to look into the souls of foreign leaders and use US policy to dispense justice for their sins."

The downsides of the new approach

Trump's actions, above all his pursuit of business deals with authoritarian governments in the Gulf and far beyond, underscore these words' import.

Unlike Reagan, Carter, Bush, Barack Obama, and Joe Biden, Trump has made it clear that the US has no interest in advocating for human rights and democracy, speaking out against authoritarian abuses, and pressing for the release of political dissidents.

To be sure, the look-the-other-way doctrine avoids the sort of overreach that characterized Bush's presidency, when zeal for spreading democracy led to the costly, ill-advised invasion of Iraq.

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It also makes it easier for the US to work constructively with governments carrying out policies at home that would normally pose an obstacle to commercial ties or cooperation on critical bilateral, regional, or global issues.

But the downsides of the new approach offset these considerations. The Trump Doctrine increases the odds that governments so inclined will double down on domestic repression and efforts to subvert democracy – a form of government often associated not just with greater personal freedom but also with free markets supported by the rule of law and less aggressive foreign policy.

Promoting democracy thus benefits US investors and limits the risk that America becomes mired in costly or prolonged foreign conflicts.

The US has changed

The Trump Doctrine also distances the US from many of its traditional friends and allies,

most of which, not coincidentally, happen to be democracies. Such estrangement works against American influence.

That said, the ability of the US to conduct a foreign policy that supports freedom abroad depends in no small part on its willingness to practice what it preaches.



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No country can talk the talk without walking the walk, and the Trump administration's violation of many of the norms and practices that sustain democracy would undermine its ability to advocate for it elsewhere, were it so inclined.

No doctrine is entirely consistent – during the Cold War, the US often supported anti-Communists who were anything but democrats – and Trump's doctrine is no exception. There is a self-serving, rightist bias.

His administration has been critical of European governments and has made clear its preference for far-right forces, including the nationalist Karol Nawrocki, who won Poland's presidency. Despite reducing America's foreign entanglements, Trump has also waged a campaign against Greenland and Canada.

But these are exceptions. The thrust of the Trump Doctrine – not to allow anti-democratic behavior to get in the way of doing business – is clear.

For a long time, the US sought to change the

world, annoying some and inspiring others. Those days are gone, in some ways for better, but mostly for worse. The US has changed. It is coming to resemble many of the countries and governments it once criticized. It is as tragic as it is ironic.

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