

# United States: Trump Brings His Economic Nationalism to Center Stage

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The past weeks have brought to the fore two main issues concerning Trump.

The first was his doubling down on one central theme of his election campaign, economic nationalism, his charge that most of the rest of the world is exploiting the United States and he will fight back. This has been somewhat muted in the first months of his presidency, but now he is again emphasizing it.

The second, also a main feature of his election campaign, is his drive to establish himself as the authoritarian President, the strongman who can take on the dysfunction of the establishments of the two capitalist parties that dominate American politics. This is part and parcel of his economic nationalism and therefore political nationalism — his assertion that he is the strongman who can take on the rest of the world.

Now we are in the midst of Congressional and other investigations of charges that Trump has and is colluding with Russia, that Russia interfered in the U.S. election to back him, that Trump's firing of FBI Director James Comey proves all this, and so forth. This is a naked bare-knuckle power struggle at the top, and its outcome may reflect one way or another on Trump's authoritarian ambitions. It is too early to tell what that outcome is likely to be, and I won't deal with that aspect here.

When he arrived in Europe as part of his first international trip, his economic nationalism came to the fore again. He chastised the NATO nations for not paying their "fair share" in funding the warmongering alliance. He also was angered by the "unfair" economic relations between the European Union and the United States.

He especially singled out Germany, which he said was "bad, very bad," for the fact that Germany exports significantly more to the U.S. than vice versa. He muttered that not many Chevrolets are seen on German streets.

His demeanor was insulting to the representatives of the European nations present, above all to Angela Merkel. At one point he physically shoved aside the representative of Montenegro, to get in the forefront of the assembled "dignitaries," as they are called in the capitalist press.

In his speech explaining why he was pulling out of the Paris Accords on climate change, he barely mentioned that issue. He didn't have to, because his position that global warming is a "hoax" has been made abundantly clear. More important, his executive orders have given the green light to the fossil fuel giants to go full steam ahead — the real, practical meaning of his climate change denial. His appointments to head the Environmental Protection and other agencies with climate change deniers is another example of where he stands.

Former Secretary of State John Kerry said that Trump didn't have to take the provocative step of withdrawing from the Paris Accords, since they were purely voluntary, and he could have just ignored them. Why then did he do it?

That was made clear in his long speech, a diatribe on how the rest of the world is exploiting the U.S., raising every alleged example he could think of, once again singling out Germany.

In his speech his main accusation against the Accords was that they were designed to economically attack the United States. He especially rejected the stipulation in the Accords that the rich countries should help the developing countries cope with greenhouse gas emissions by giving them subsidies. The actual subsidies proposed in the Accords are paltry compared to the problem, but Trump nixed any U.S. participation in them at all.

He repeated a number of times that he represented cities in the U.S. hard hit economically, and “not Paris.” This was a jab not only against the Accords, but also against newly-elected French president Emmanuel Macron, whom Trump campaigned against. (Yes, Trump “meddled” in the French election, supporting Le Pen – and so did Obama, who called for a vote for Macron.) By implication, the jab was against the rest of Europe, too, and almost all countries of the world who signed the Accords.

However, so far Trump’s bark – accompanied by snarls and frothing at the mouth – has not seen any bite. His attacks against China made during the election have been at least temporarily shelved. He has yet to impose new tariffs on any country, or any other promised protectionist measures.

Trump may be seeking to impose tariffs against Mexican sugar, which under NAFTA can now freely come into the U.S. But Mexico is one thing, Germany another.

Is all this loud barking meant just to reassure his base that he will “bring jobs back” to the U.S.? Or is it a prelude to real protectionist action? Such action would probably hinge in part on economic and political developments world-wide.

Trump’s ratcheting up military spending to increase militarily threats in the world in general, and eventually confronting China in the South China Sea, and North Korea, would imply the need to bring back basic industry to the U.S. It would be awkward to build tanks in the U.S. with steel from China. If the ruling class wants to back up increased economic nationalism with threats of force, this would be rational from their point of view, in the face of increased economic rivalry in the world. But such a course faces the problem that much of the U.S. economy is tied to international supply chains.

This may be changing. *Financial Times* columnist Gillian Tett reports that “Executives quietly turn away from globalization” by bringing some supply chains back to the U.S. One example she cites is “3M, the American manufacturing powerhouse [which] seemed until recently a beacon of globalization....

“But here is a curious thing: if you ask Inge Thulin, the Swedish-born chief executive of 3M, to describe corporate strategy these days, he does not speak of globalization. Instead he prefers to talk about ‘localization’ – and the benefits of operating in the mighty US of A.”

Finally, it should be noted that Trump’s economic nationalism vis a vis the world is tied into his white nationalism. His appeals to white racism in the U.S. against Mexican and Central American immigrants, against Muslim immigrants fleeing U.S. wars, his reaffirmation of the long-standing U.S. support of the Israeli oppression of Palestinians and Arabs, threats against Iran, his opposition to Blacks Lives Matter and much more are part his drive to “Make [white] America Great Again” at home and abroad.

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