

Why the Trump Doctrine is fatally flawed

Some foreign policy intellectuals are trying to reverse-engineer a Trump doctrine. It's not really working out.

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Last week, the hard-working staff at [Spoiler Alerts took to task](#) Kiron Skinner, the State Department's director of policy planning, for her "clash of civilizations" comments about China. I was [hardly the only foreign policy observer to do so](#).

In response, Skinner emailed me to say that I "didn't listen to the whole interview" and that I should provide "more comprehensive reporting." Challenge accepted! Indeed, I would encourage everyone to check out Skinner's entire 30-minute conversation with Anne-Marie Slaughter: Start at [the nine-hour and 13-minute mark of this video](#).

Having watched all of it, I conclude that [the reporting by Joel Gehrke](#) of the Washington Examiner was accurate. To be fair to Skinner, however, she said more than what was reported in that story, and it is worth commenting on that as well.

Skinner attempted to articulate a Trump Doctrine. This includes the notion that the nation-state "is the best way to protect people and to allow for prosperity and human rights and civil rights in the world" and a focus on the "national interest." Skinner also stressed China far more than Russia: "We see it as a more fundamental long-term threat."

As it turns out, this echoes another recent attempt to articulate a Trump Doctrine. Former NSC spokesman Michael Anton — he of "[ceaseless importation of Third World foreigners](#)" and "[let's end birthright citizenship](#)" fame — published "[The Trump Doctrine](#)" in Foreign Policy. In that essay, he wrote: "It can be stated like this: Let's all put our own countries first, and be candid about it, and recognize that it's nothing to be ashamed of. Putting our interests first will make us all safer and more prosperous. If there is a Trump Doctrine, that's it."

Anton later writes that "this notion is very hard for some to accept. And to be clear, by 'some' I mean the foreign-policy establishment, the academic and intellectual elite, and the opinion-making classes." And let's be clear: Anton is right. As

someone who studies international relations for a living, I see only two ways to interpret Skinner's and Anton's comments: banal or contradictory.

They're banal because the idea that a grand strategy should be grounded in national interest is the opposite of transformative: It's Grand Strategy 101. All grand strategies believe this. The difference is in how national interests are defined, and in calculating the best means to achieve them. That Anton and Skinner believe the concept of national interest is controversial suggests that they have caricatured viewpoints at variance with their own.

If one tries to flesh out these concepts further, the contradictions become manifest. Consider the deeper implications of Anton's sentence: "Putting our interests first will make us all safer and more prosperous." The more you think about that sentence, the less sense it makes. It implies that a world of unilateral great power foreign policies leads to a harmony of interests. This is a far more naive assessment of international affairs than even the most ardent idealist would believe. Indeed, Anton does not really believe it, because otherwise he would not devote the bulk of his essay to the "globalization has taken its place as the imperialism of our time" claptrap that follows. The only possible takeaway from Anton's essay is that the greatest existential threat to the United States is the European Union, because the E.U. represents a direct affront to nationalism. That assertion explains a fair amount of President Trump's foreign policy, but makes zero geopolitical sense.

The other contradiction is reconciling "America First" with Skinner's suggestion that the rivalry with China will be a generations-long affair. The moment one starts thinking of China as a long-term threat, the question to ask is how the United States should organize its resources and relationships to best advance U.S. interests.

It is precisely when competition is viewed as a long-run affair that international institutions become more valuable. There is no denying that for a great power, acting without multilateral constraints affords some short-term tactical advantages. Properly conceived, however, international institutions lead to some long-run efficiencies of exercising power. As G. John Ikenberry argued in "[Liberal Leviathan](#)":

The more the leading state is capable of dominating and abandoning weaker states, the more that weaker states will care about restraints on its exercise of power – and the more they are likely to make some concessions to obtain the restraint and commitment....

When a state is sufficiently powerful to shape the organization of international relations, rules and institutions can serve quite useful purposes, becoming tools for managing international hierarchy. In the

broadest sense, rules and institutions provide the leading state with instruments of political control. They are useful in shaping and entrenching a favorable international environment.

In contrast, a “clash of civilizations” approach to China serves the long-term interests of — wait for it — China, as [Hal Brands noted in Bloomberg Opinion](#):

“Clash” rhetoric sacrifices the moral high ground in the U.S.-China competition. America has long claimed that democratic values and human rights are not distinctly Western ideas. Instead, they are universal ideas that people everywhere deserve to enjoy — and that no government has a right to deny its people....

The Chinese government, by contrast, has embraced the concept of civilizational difference as a means of autocratic self-protection. Beijing has long rejected the idea that it should liberalize its political system — or simply stop throwing dissidents in jail — on grounds that “Western” concepts of democracy and individual rights are incompatible with the traditions of China’s unique civilization....

The clash thesis is also geopolitically dangerous, because here, too, it plays into China’s hands. The Chinese government has long argued that the world should, in fact, be divided along civilizational lines: That Asians have more in common with each other than they do with the U.S., and that Washington should therefore leave Asia to the Asians — meaning that it should allow China to dominate that part of the world. This argument provides an intellectual underpinning for everything Beijing is doing to push the U.S. out of the Western Pacific: Undermining U.S. alliances, building up its military, and weaving webs of economic dependence around its neighbors.

I have yet to hear a cogent explanation from a Trump foreign policy intellectual as to why a generations-long rivalry is best approached with a rejection of the tools and structures that attracted allies to the U.S. position in the first place. And as [I noted in Foreign Affairs](#), any doctrine that elects to confront Europe and China simultaneously is grand strategy malpractice of the first order.

Skinner acknowledged to Slaughter that Trump’s instincts contain “fundamental contradictions and tensions within them.” The problem is worse than that. Even the intellectual rationalizations of the Trump Doctrine cannot be logically reconciled.