

The price of 'America First' has become clear

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The COVID-19 outbreak has just exposed, with remarkable clarity, the bankruptcy of U.S. President Donald Trump's "America First" agenda. His administration's efforts to block or reroute shipments of medical equipment from non-U.S. customers demonstrate a selfishness and short-sightedness that is virtually unprecedented in modern U.S. history.

"America First" was always a tone-deaf concept. It was first used by U.S. politicians in the first half of the 20th century to justify refusal to join the first and second world wars. Whatever merits the policy may have had — there is a case for a less interventionist, more constrained foreign policy — the movement was tainted by its supporters' anti-Semitic and pro-fascist inclinations.

Undaunted Trump said from the start of his candidacy that his presidency would stand atop an "America First" agenda. He made it a theme in his inaugural address as well as other major international speeches he has given. His 2019 speech to the United Nations General Assembly warned that "The future belongs to patriots. The future belongs to sovereign and independent nations," adding that "The free world must embrace its national foundations. It must not attempt to erase them or replace them."

Foreign policy will always calibrate between nationalism and an internationalist outlook. (Trump prefers the term "globalist" for the latter, a word he considers more pejorative.) But the refusal to see how an international outlook can advance national interests is a dangerous blind spot in the president's — and his supporters' — thinking.

National security isn't just the product of a single nation's strength, no matter how that strength is calculated. Countries are stronger when they are protected by an order that is larger than themselves alone: That is the logic of alliances, international institutions and international law. The United States has for the last 75 years helped construct and lead that order, to protect its interests and to position itself as a leader (a source of advantage itself, as well as another way of advancing those interests). Japan has been a critical partner in that effort.

Trump and his America First aficionados think that they can do just as well alone. Or that the national resources that they command — the nation's military, economy, creativity and innovative capacity — will compel other countries to line up behind them.

In keeping with that logic, the president has shown disdain for the other accoutrements of U.S. power. He has disparaged alliances and criticized allies as freeloaders and unfair trade partners. He has withdrawn from multilateral agreements, dismissing them as poorly negotiated deals that straitjacket U.S. power and influence. He has undercut international consensus when his preferred rhetoric was not adopted.

While world leaders have been exasperated by his approach, Trump's nationalism did not actually threaten their nations' well-being — until the administration declared war on U.S. companies during the COVID-19 outbreak. Last week, after discovering that 3M, the manufacturer of, among other things, protective medical equipment, had produced 10 million masks in Singapore and was selling them to other Asian countries, Trump warned that the company would have "a hell of a price to pay" if it did not do a better job of "taking care" of the U.S. The next day, he was blunter still: "We need the masks. We don't want other people getting it."

U.S. officials are taking troubling steps to secure them. Last week, a shipment of 200,000 Berlin-bound masks was rerouted in Thailand and sent to the U.S. German officials accused Washington of seizing them in an "an

act of modern piracy.” Trump denied the seizure, but it appears that U.S. officials intervened, offering the shippers multiples of the original contract to redirect the supplies.

That appears to be the new approach. A U.S. Department of Homeland Security official said that U.S. companies and the government have been paying above market price for much of the gear purchased overseas — “We’ve gotten our hands on every bit of it that we can” — and promised to keep buying “until we have way too much.” A French official sputtered that “On the [airport] tarmac, the Americans get out their cash and pay three or four times what we have offered.”

Hard cash isn’t enough, however. Last week, the Trump administration invoked the Defense Production Act (DPA), a Korean war-era legislation that allows the federal government to use “any and all authority” to buy equipment it “determines to be appropriate” from companies and their subsidiaries.

The administration had been reluctant to use the DPA during the COVID-19 outbreak. The president claims that it smacks of nationalization and the U.S. doesn’t work that way. In fact, the federal government routinely uses the law to place hundreds of thousands of orders for equipment it considers vital.

3M replied that it is going “above and beyond” to boost production of N95 masks for the U.S. market, raising U.S. production by more than 50 percent, from 22 million in January to 35 million in March, and expects to reach 50 million in June with the entire increase being distributed in the United States.

3M also challenged the order to halt the export of respirators from the U.S. to Canada and Latin American markets — it has traditionally exported about 6 million masks a month to them — arguing that it would have “significant humanitarian implications” and would undercut U.S. security as other countries halt exports to the U.S. in response.

3M warned that “If that were to occur, the net number of respirators being made available to the United States would actually decrease,” pointedly noting that it had secured approval from China to export to the U.S. 10 million N95 respirators that it manufactures there.

This is the reality of global supply chains. As much as 80 percent of active pharmaceutical ingredients used in the U.S. are sourced globally. Asia produces up to 50 percent of N95 masks as well as the raw materials and fabrics for N95 masks manufactured elsewhere and a large majority of isolation gowns. U.S. threats to cut off Canada ring hollow when a Canadian mill is the world’s only producer of K10S, a paper pulp used to make surgical masks and gowns. It may be time to rebuild national supply chains but there isn’t time to do that in the middle of a crisis.

Japan has taken both approaches, setting a goal of securing 600 million masks per month by March, with domestic producers providing 100 million masks per week. To reach that total, the government prodded mask manufacturers to increase production, and provided subsidies for other companies to get in the game. Sharp, for example, has converted a clean room at one of its factories for mask production and it’s expected turn out a half million masks a day. The government also set a target of importing 1 million masks a week by April 1, and that number will rise to 20 million masks per week in April.

Risking its own supplies is an obvious flaw in the U.S. strategy. But there is a second, more appalling problem: During a global pandemic, the U.S. is banning the export and seizing shipments of critical equipment lawfully contracted and paid for by friends, allies and neighbors. That does not tarnish, erode or undercut U.S. leadership — it destroys it. Until now, “America First” was merely uninformed, self-indulgent rhetoric. Now, it has become a tool to physically endanger U.S. friends and partners.

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