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# Opinion – Trump, Race and International Politics

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INZAM P I, OCT 5 2025

How can we examine US President Trump's domestic policy and foreign policy through the lens of race? The idea here is not to demonize Trump but to understand him. Many experts tend to describe Trump as transactional, and renowned neo-classical realist Fareed Zakaria is no exception. The term "transactional" literally implies a simple "give-and-take," "buy or sell," or exchange based on mutual benefits. It overlooks Trump's coercive approach to negotiating deals, which includes tariff threats, disrespectful language, and personal verbal attacks on world leaders and diplomats. His approach thus carries a clear element of supremacism over the other party, going far beyond what a mere transactional framework would suggest.

Pratap Bhanu Mehta opined that describing Trump as just transactional is a serious mistake as supremacism is embedded in his diplomatic style and he has a reputation for bad faith. Simply stating his style as 'transactional' also underestimates his notorious stand on the question of race. Nevertheless, it is both inaccurate and ahistorical to assume that Donald Trump is the only racist president in the history of the United States as well. Racism and racist leadership are not new; racial prejudice is deeply rooted in American society. In fact, condoning racial division has historically been a bipartisan phenomenon. What sets Trump apart is his open expression and exploitation of racial divisions to achieve political objectives, often disregarding the conventions of politically correct language. Like those before him, Trump is a product of the broader social churning that has taken place in American society.

President Trump's racist remarks can neither be justified by saying that he is a democratically elected leader nor by saying he has bagged a considerable number of votes from the "non-white" population. It can only serve as a fig leaf to cover his racist comments. Moreover, such arguments risk negating the heterogeneity among "non-white" populations and neglect the effect of discursive circulation of dominant racist discourse. Supporting FBI data, Griffin Sims Edwards and Stephen Rushin, in their research article, used time series analysis and panel regression techniques to provide an empirical basis for concluding that hate crimes and prejudice-driven violence spiked during Trump's election campaigns in the United States, marking the second-highest peak in the past 25 years. It is equally not surprising that Trump won the elections because the majority of voters in the country consider him a warrior, all-powerful, who came in to preserve the "pristine white culture." Racism, sexism, and xenophobia are the three main pillars of his policy gaining currency in American society. As Professor Shaun Narine argues, Trump's deliberate attempt to portray "America as a victim of globalisation" is to appease his American voters, who have been frustrated with decreasing employment opportunities and increased paranoia about outsiders taking over their jobs. Trump, as a smart politician, has effectively monetised such sentiments to garner popular support.

According to Stuart Hall's theory of representation, words are the codes that produce meaning and can be expressed in spoken form. So, from a social constructivist perspective, words do convey meaning and reflect one's viewpoints; therefore, it is paramount to analyse the inflammatory remarks and crude references made by President Trump. The instrumental utilisation of X (formerly Twitter) and the emerging role of the state-tech-entertainment complex in the permeation and normalisation of the racist comments could not be avoided either. It was more evident in the first administration than the current one. His racist comments against football player Colin Kaepernick, his obsession to portray Obama as Black and Harris as Indian, and his portrayal of Baltimore as rat-infested and Haiti and El Salvador as 'shithole' nations indicate the gravity of racist conceptual map that he subscribes to and advocates for.

The connection between ethnic nationalism and racism also needs much attention here. Andrew Gawthorpe

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contends that while he occasionally praised China's civilisational legacy, he prioritised the interests of Western civilisation and at times demarcated its distinction from China in explicitly racial terms. He perceived China's economic and cultural rise over the United States as a threat to Western civilization. His propaganda during COVID-19, exemplified by labelling it the "China virus" or "kung flu," and the disrespectful treatment of Indian immigrants during deportation, illustrate this tendency. Thus, it is not a misnomer to say that he regarded Asian Americans as degenerate and a threat to the western civilization. Remember, he also categorized Latino immigrants as criminal invaders, and relegitimized overt white nationalism. The Trump administration demonised the immigrants by considering them not fully American, less than human, a threat, rapists, and genetically criminals. His attacks on DEI programmes is not only to cater to the emotive appeals of conservative white supremacist groups but also a direct attack on anti-racist Black movements that got strengthened in the aftermath of George Floyd's death. It is the same positionality of white privilege that induces him to comfortably freeze on civil rights litigation and policing reforms.

Many experts find comfort in believing that Trump is a "deal maker." However, if one examines Trump's role as a supposed smart and honest broker, one is compelled to conclude that the facts and reality do not add up. In fact, Trump has a deft hand with diplomacy. His mediatory efforts often worsened conflicts, as seen in the cases of India-Pakistan, Russia-Ukraine, Israel-Iran, and Israel-Palestine. He did not have a problem with Russia taking over Ukraine either. His temporary reach out to Russia was primarily due to its rise as an emboldened adversary, partly its civilizational heritage, and a reasonably resilient economy despite the sanctions. A wise head of government knows what he knows and what he does not. This self-awareness is precisely what is missing in many electoral autocrats, including Trump. Trump is a staunch carrier of what Gawthorpe calls "civilizational Wilsonianism" by which he believes that he is on a civilizing mission. His proposition to transform Gaza into 'the Riviera of the Middle East' can also be read as reflecting his assumption of the self (America) as "civilized," while casting the other (Gazans) as backward. Neither imperialism nor orientalism alone could explain his actions. Thus, it is a tough time for the scholars of international relations to theorise about them. Either a combination of both, or neither, could explain his actions.

Another prevailing argument is that he is thoughtless. But he is far from banal. His words and actions are deliberate, and he is clearly aware of their implications. Perhaps, he is merely a real estate guy striving to make his mark on global history. Trump does not hold the love for peace that many assume; his mediation appears less about achieving genuine peace and more about gaining fame. America remains interested in resolving conflicts only insofar as doing so serves its own interests. His aim is loud and clear: "Make America Great Again" (MAGA). Trump will pursue peace only if it offers him tangible rewards—whether that be a personal gain, access to rich mineral mines from the parties involved, or increased investment in the United States, as exemplified in the case of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict.

We need to look at certain issues often sidelined in mainstream IR discourse. To this end, the question of race, its influence on the opinions of political leaders, and its subsequent impact on the framing of foreign policy, should not be neglected. Deracializing IR is an inseparable mission of the decolonisation project. In this age of what C. Rajamohan calls "con-intern" or "conservative international," a marriage of convenience between populism and multiple factors like pro-market transactional economic policy, anti-climate politics, anti-immigration, and racist ideologies cannot be overlooked as well. It is also worth considering how these interrelations shape the domestic and foreign policy of a state. The evidence presented in this piece therefore confirms that race remains an important if not primary factor influencing both the domestic and foreign policy of the United States in the 21st century. To paraphrase Pratap Bhanu Mehta and apply it to the context of race under the Trump administration, it can be observed that there is a *schadenfreude* over the fact that the "racist mask" came off the international order. Racism in US foreign policy is not implicit anymore. The complexity of language used in expressing, permeating, and normalising racism has been shed. Millions benefit from racist discourse, and it is therefore likely to continue in the United States even after Trump leaves the office. Now, as students, scholars, and teachers of IR, what can we do?

As Sankaran Krishna succinctly puts it: "We have to work and see around the dazzling blindness of white IR and its abstractions, accepting and reiterating the conjoined histories that constitute us and our craft, telling us what to do tomorrow." These words are a timely call to take race seriously in international relations. Our syllabi and pedagogical

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practices must address the inbuilt racist biases and challenge the hierarchies of knowledge that shape the discipline. We must also make concerted efforts to foster a politically conscious approach within the discipline. Indeed, such a deracialization process on the path of decolonization involves not just social and psychological reform but also epistemic reconstitution and continuous resistance against the hegemonic discourse that operates at the unit, systemic, and planetary levels.

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