

Does Donald Trump have a grand strategy?

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The pace of events in the first six months of the Trump presidency proved dazzling. One day, 6 April 2017, illustrates the point. During any recent presidential administration, either the decision of the US Senate to change its historic rules about the selection of a Supreme Court justice or the visit of China's Premier, Xi Jinping, would have dominated the US media for days. But on that day both these events were usurped in coverage when US Navy destroyers in the Mediterranean fired 59 Tomahawk cruise missiles at the Shayrat airfield in western Homs province in Syria, in retaliation for the Assad government's use of chemical weapons in an attack in Khan Sheikhoun earlier that week.¹ What followed was the predictable new round of speculation: did this episode reveal whether President Donald Trump had developed a 'doctrine' or—more expansively—a 'grand strategy', even in his administration's infancy?²

Speculation about Trump's possible grand strategy has been rife not just since he took office but before he was inaugurated.³ Micah Zenko and Rebecca Friedman Lissner declared that Trump had no grand strategy—before his inauguration.⁴

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¹ Michael R. Gordon, Helene Cooper and Michael D. Shear, 'Dozens of US missiles hit air base in Syria', *New York Times*, 6 April 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/06/world/middleeast/us-said-to-weigh-military-responses-to-syrian-chemical-attack.html?hp&action=click&pgtype=Homepage&clickSource=story-heading&module=a-lede-package-region®ion=top-news&WT.nav=top-news&_r=0. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 1 Aug. 2017.)

² Nancy LeTourneau, 'There is no Trump Doctrine', *Washington Monthly*, 10 April 2017, <http://washington-monthly.com/2017/04/10/there-is-no-trump-doctrine/>; Peter Baker, 'The emerging Trump Doctrine: don't follow doctrine', *New York Times*, 8 April 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/08/us/politics/trump-doctrine-foreign-policy.html?smprod=nytcore-ipad&smid=nytcore-ipad-share>.

³ See Max Fisher, 'Trump's military ambition: raw power as a means and an end', *New York Times*, 3 March 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/03/world/americas/donald-trump-us-military.html?smprod=nytcore-ipad&smid=nytcore-ipad-share>; Colin Kahl and Hal Brands, 'Trump's grand strategy train wreck', *Foreign Policy*, 31 Jan. 2017, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/01/31/trumps-grand-strategic-train-wreck/>; Stephen M. Walt, 'America's new president is not a rational actor', *Foreign Policy*, 25 Jan. 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/01/25/americas-new-president-is-not-a-rational-actor/>; David Rothkopf, 'Trump's Pox Americana', *Foreign Policy*, 26 Jan. 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/01/26/trumps-pox-americana-the-retreat-of-the-indispensable-nation/>; Frank Hoffman, 'The case for strategic discipline during the next presidency', *War on the Rocks*, 10 Jan. 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/01/the-case-for-strategic-discipline-during-the-next-presidency/>.

⁴ Micah Zenko and Rebecca Friedman Lissner, 'Trump is going to regret not having a grand strategy', *Foreign Policy*, 13 Jan. 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/01/13/trump-is-going-to-regret-not-having-a-grand-strategy/>. As a companion to that claim, see Stephen Sestanovich, 'The brilliant incoherence of Trump's foreign

No doubt unfolding events will sustain this debate through the coming weeks, months and, possibly, years.

Stepping back from the news cycle, it is worth noting that such deliberation about the Trump presidency—in principle—is unexceptional. His daily, often abrasive, use of social media may be disorienting and stimulate frenzied debate. But grand strategy debates themselves, regardless of the incumbent, are always fashionable. Every American election generates discussions about whether the incoming administration will have a grand strategy and, if so, what form it will take. Then, within months of an inauguration, scholars, journalists and pundits begin reviewing the president's record. They parse each administration's policies, searching for an overarching pattern that indicates coherency and a higher order of thinking.⁵ Presidents are then either critiqued for their grand strategy (as was the case with George W. Bush's neo-conservative one) or rebuked for its absence (as was the case with Barack Obama).⁶

That said, reviews of Trump's approach to foreign affairs in his first half-year in office have been more impassioned than reflections on those of his immediate predecessors. The debates about whether Trump has a grand strategy, if so what form it takes, and what form it *should* take, rage on. What these debates overlook, however, are two logically antecedent questions: can Donald Trump—or any other American president—implement a grand strategy in the twenty-first century? And if he cannot, what are the consequences of that?

It is our claim, substantiated in our forthcoming book, *The end of grand strategy: US maritime operations in the twenty-first century*,⁷ that the current debate erroneously assumes that presidential leadership is determinative: that any president can choose and implement a grand strategy. We contend that while this may have been true during the Cold War, it certainly is not today. This is not simply a matter of the quality of leadership. As we explain below, this incapacity is a function of a combination of a shifting external environment, the vagaries of America's expanding national security bureaucracy and, most importantly, the constraints imposed by diverse operational demands. Proponents of every kind of grand strategy adopt a deductive logical flow—from the leadership's principles to operations. But if we reverse that linkage, emphasizing the challenges and constraints imposed by field operations and policy implementation, a quite different picture

policy', *The Atlantic*, May 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/05/the-brilliant-incoherence-of-trumps-foreign-policy/521430/>; Joyce P. Kaufman, 'The US perspective on NATO under Trump: lessons of the past and prospects for the future', *International Affairs* 93: 2, March 2017, pp. 251–66.

⁵ Michael Clarke and Anthony Ricketts, 'Did Obama have a grand strategy?', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 40: 1–2, 2017, pp. 295–324.

⁶ For an overview of both claims, see Daniel Drezner, 'Does Obama have a grand strategy?', *Foreign Affairs* 90: 4, July–Aug. 2011, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2011-06-17/does-obama-have-grand-strategy>. For a more conclusive appraisal of Barack Obama, see Hal Brands, 'Barack Obama and the dilemmas of American grand strategy', *Washington Quarterly* 39: 4, Winter 2016, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/0163660X.2016.1261557>. See also Asaf Siniver and Scott Lucas, 'The Islamic State lexical battleground: US foreign policy in the Middle East', *International Affairs* 92: 1, Jan. 2016, pp. 63–80; Andreas Krieg, 'Externalizing the burden of war: the Obama doctrine and US foreign policy in the Middle East', *International Affairs* 92: 1, Jan. 2016, pp. 97–114.

⁷ Simon Reich and Peter Dombrowski, *The end of grand strategy: US maritime operations in the twenty-first century* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, forthcoming January 2018).

emerges of how US strategy operates. There is a significant gap between what the political leadership often says (especially about a single overriding grand strategy) and the way in which the military operates; between rhetoric and behaviour.

Arguably, President Trump's first half-year in office demonstrates that fact more clearly than previous administrations have done. During the campaign he made forthright claims, promising radical changes in policy and in operations. These soon gave way to Trump's candid admission about a range of international issues—that they are 'complicated'.⁸ This admission is striking: these complexities sabotage efforts to impose a universal blueprint, reinforcing our view that the search for a logically coherent, internally consistent grand strategy is futile.⁹

It is therefore easy to attribute the Trump administration's apparent incoherence to his own volatility, or the inexperience or incompetence of his staff.¹⁰ All may exist. But beyond the noise generated by and about Trump, much the same (albeit employing different language) was said about Obama.¹¹ This doesn't mean—as some critics contend—that the alternative is chaos, purely reactive tactics, a transactional approach; or—more analytically—that there is no underlying logic to American strategic behaviour.¹² Indeed, Obama and Bush faced many of the same problems and—despite their professed differences—each responded to a variety of foreign policy challenges in markedly *similar* ways (as we briefly illustrate below). As we have demonstrated more comprehensively elsewhere, examples of strategic continuity across recent administrations have ranged from the massive enhancement of America's border security resources to the ways in which they have combated nuclear smuggling, piracy, human trafficking and the drugs trade, and how they have addressed issues of both collaboration and friction with Russia.¹³

Moreover, Americans may debate a variety of grand strategies. But a combination of systemic international challenges and bureaucratic tussling between civilian and military leaders ensures that any presidential administration simultaneously implements a variety of *calibrated* strategies, depending on context. Examination of the often shrill rhetoric that surrounds public debates, or even the policy initiatives that emerge, might lead to the inference that American strategy is relatively unified. We argue, however, that focusing on what the United States actually

⁸ Kia Makarechi, 'Trump slowly realizing job is more complicated than he assumed', *Vanity Fair*, 13 April 2017, <http://www.vanityfair.com/news/2017/04/trump-complicated-president>.

⁹ Amanda Erickson, 'Trump thought China could get North Korea to comply. It's not that easy', *Washington Post*, 13 April 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/04/13/trump-thought-china-could-get-n-korea-to-comply-its-not-that-easy/?utm_term=.74843a89d9e5; David E. Sanger and William J. Board, 'A "Cuban Missile Crisis in slow motion" in North Korea', *New York Times*, 16 April 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/16/us/politics/north-korea-missile-crisis-slow-motion.html?hp&action=click&pgtype=Homepage&clickSource=story-heading&module=first-column-region®ion=top-news&WT.nav=top-news&_r=0.

¹⁰ Stephen M. Walt, 'The world is even less stable than it looks', *Foreign Policy*, 26 June 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/06/26/the-world-is-even-less-stable-than-it-looks/>.

¹¹ Jay Newton-Small, 'Obama's foreign-policy problem', *Time*, 18 Dec. 2007, <http://content.time.com/time/politics/article/0,8599,1695803,00.html>; 'The decider', *The Economist*, 26 Nov. 2009, <http://www.economist.com/node/14969177>.

¹² For this kind of assertion, see Richard Haass's critique six months into the Trump presidency in Yoni Appelbaum, 'Trump's foreign-policy "ad hococracy"', *The Atlantic*, 27 June 2017, https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/06/trumps-foreign-policy-adhococracy/531732/?utm_source=fbw.

¹³ Reich and Dombrowski, *The end of grand strategy*.

does strategically and, more specifically, operationally leads to a different conclusion: namely, that operational constraints are more important than grand strategists recognize, circumscribing both strategic options and the implementation of policy.

Our argument implies that any president has less latitude to change strategy (in Trump's case, towards a consistently isolationist, 'America first' approach) than is commonly presumed. This may explain why Trump has repeatedly suggested he will defer to his military in strategizing, most recently in Afghanistan.¹⁴ It also suggests that focusing primarily on rhetoric misses an important point: that in an increasingly complex world, where the United States faces limits on its material resources and a growing range of security challenges, multiple strategies are inevitably employed. As we demonstrate with three brief examples, even for a president as vociferous and categorical as Trump, strategy is not as 'grand' and universal as it is contextual and thus contingent. Changes can and do occur. But they are often influenced more by operational considerations than by rhetoric or principles—a factor often overlooked by International Relations scholars.

Strategizing in the twenty-first century

The literature on grand strategy is extensive. Definitions abound, from narrow ones that focus on military threats to expansive ones that incorporate diplomatic and economic dimensions—and opportunities as well as threats.¹⁵ The minimalist definition is that grand strategy links a country's 'ways, means and ends'. It therefore assumes a process, from guiding principles and objectives to implementation. How, by whom, and for what purpose this process is conducted are the contested elements in the debate. Scholars often wax nostalgic about the halcyon days of the Cold War, when America's grand strategy of containment was transparent and bipartisan politics 'stopped at the water's edge'. As Hal Brands has ably demonstrated, however, neither was necessarily true. From Truman onwards, the president and Congress often fought vociferously over principles and strategy—often crippling even statesmen such as Henry Kissinger.¹⁶

The problem of cohering around, and implementing, one strategy has become further complicated by the shifts in nature of the international system in the twenty-first century. During the Cold War, the United States had to strategize predominantly for one enemy (the Soviet Union). This adversary posed a narrow range of threats (from ideological competition to extreme nuclear destruction) and

¹⁴ Jeremy Herb, 'As White House defers to Pentagon, Congress mulls new checks on military power', CNN, 21 June 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2017/06/21/politics/congress-trump-war-limits/index.html>.

¹⁵ For a recent selection of definitions varying in expanse and focus, see Hal Brands, *What good is grand strategy? Power and purpose in American statecraft from Harry S. Truman to George W. Bush* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015), p. 3; Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, *America abroad: the United States' global role in the 21st century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 75; Stephen G. Brooks, G. John Ikenberry and William C. Wohlforth, 'Don't come home, America: the case against retrenchment', *International Security* 37: 3, 2012–13, p. 11; Barry R. Posen, *Restraint: a new foundation for US grand strategy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014), p. 1. The historical antecedents of contemporary grand strategy can be found in Lukas Milevski, *The evolution of modern grand strategic thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

¹⁶ Brands, *What good is grand strategy?*, pp. 59–101.

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engaged the US in limited forms of conflict (irregular warfare through proxies in failed and fragile states coupled with the threat of conventional warfare in Europe). This offered a clearly defined framework. In contrast, since the collapse of the Soviet Union all three elements of grand strategy have acquired novel components that presidents—and strategists—have been forced to address. Together they ensure that implementing a grand strategy faces insurmountable obstacles.

First, in addition to the traditional state-based threats, various threatening non-state actors have emerged. Terrorist organizations, for example, predated the 1990s. Most, however, then operated within national boundaries: for example, the IRA, ETA and the Baader Meinhof Group. Only a few, notably the Palestine Liberation Organization, operated transnationally—and they did not recruit from western populations. Transnational jihadism is a recent phenomenon, with types of actors (cells, networks and lone wolves) against which American policy-makers must now strategize.¹⁷ The same is true of transnational criminal organizations (TCOs), whose smuggling of drugs or people from Latin America drains enormous resources and demands extensive strategizing.¹⁸ Sophisticated TCOs have proved to be canny and well resourced—and are likely to find a way under, over or through any border wall. Indeed, rather than acting as a deterrent, constructing one will arguably generate profits for them.¹⁹

Second, the forms of threat have multiplied. Trump's 'America first' electoral slogan focused on illicit flows into the United States: of people, drugs, arms and money. While all those flows have garnered plenty of attention to date, it has arguably been the flow of information—or misinformation—that has most influenced the United States in the last year, especially with the investigations into Russia's putative involvement in the 2016 election. Furthermore, President Trump has quickly discovered that the global flows of biological, chemical and nuclear technologies, parts and weapons are also part of America's 'vital national security interests', as he noted when US forces bombed Syria on 6 April.²⁰ To this list of threats must be added, of course, the issue of both transnational and domestic terrorism, which tops the security concerns of most Americans.²¹ All this said, tangible conventional military threats originating from states remain a significant problem. Sabre-rattling from North Korea (DPRK) about nuclear threats (supplemented by its enormous army), and tensions with Russia over various forms of intervention—from cyber attacks to irregular campaigns in and

¹⁷ Daniel Byman, *Al Qaeda, the Islamic State, and the global jihadist movement: what everyone needs to know* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); Manni Crone, 'Radicalization revisited: violence, politics and the skills of the body', *International Affairs* 92: 3, May 2016, pp. 587–604.

¹⁸ Phil Williams, 'Transnational criminal organizations: strategic alliances', *Washington Quarterly* 18: 1, 1995, pp. 57–72.

¹⁹ Ioan Grillo, 'Mexican drug smugglers to Trump: thanks!', *New York Times*, 5 May 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/05/opinion/sunday/mexican-drug-smugglers-to-trump-thanks.html>.

²⁰ Michael R. Gordon, Helene Cooper and Michael D. Shear, 'Dozens of US missiles hit air base in Syria', *New York Times*, 6 April 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/06/world/middleeast/us-said-to-weigh-military-responses-to-syrian-chemical-attack.html>.

²¹ Pew Research Center, 'The world facing Trump: public sees ISIS, cyberattacks, North Korea as top threats', *US Politics and Policy*, 12 Jan. 2017, <http://www.people-press.org/2017/01/12/the-world-facing-trump-public-sees-isis-cyberattacks-north-korea-as-top-threats/#ideological-divides-in-views-of-major-threats>.

against NATO countries—are just two of the principal examples of these novel, complex, multidimensional threats. America, therefore, faces an expanded variety of dangers, ranging from the conventional existential one of nuclear annihilation to non-traditional threats.²²

Third and finally, the types of conflict have also proliferated. Conventional warfare—'symmetric conflict'—predominated in American and European strategizing from the early 1800s onwards. But with the spread of wars of independence in the second half of the twentieth century, America and the major European powers became increasingly embroiled in asymmetric conflicts against under-resourced groups employing irregular forms of warfare. Often, they embraced ingenious methods and displayed (as the Viet Cong demonstrated) an inexhaustible willingness to tolerate suffering for a cause.²³ American forces, for example, incurred significant casualties because of the use of simple improvised explosive devices in Iraq and had to spend billions redesigning a replacement for their Humvees that could resist these weapons.²⁴ Today, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) illustrates the same tendency, with its use of low-tech arms and suicide bombers. To further complicate strategizing, we now have a new category—hybrid warfare.²⁵ This combines elements of conventional and asymmetric forms of conflict with the use of novel methods, such as cyber attacks. Russian paramilitary forces in eastern Ukraine used this approach as they infiltrated the country, launched cyber attacks and carried out a disinformation campaign.

The military's dilemma

Senator John McCain recognized these new factors and conditions when he said:

As our Armed Forces confront the most diverse and complex array of national security challenges since the end of World War II under extraordinarily constrained fiscal resources, we simply cannot afford to waste our precious defense dollars on unnecessary or poorly performing programs.²⁶

On the campaign trail, candidate Trump controversially promised ways to overcome this dilemma: by increasing military spending and pursuing an 'America first' strategy that would reduce US overseas commitments and shift defence burdens onto America's allies in Asia and Europe. But in practice, he has often

²² Andy Greenberg, 'A timeline of Trump's strange, contradictory statements on Russian hacking', *Wired*, 4 Jan. 2017, <https://www.wired.com/2017/01/timeline-trumps-strange-contradictory-statements-russian-hacking/>; Niv Farago, 'Washington's failure to resolve the North Korean nuclear conundrum: examining two decades of US policy', *International Affairs* 92: 5, Sept. 2016, pp. 1127–46.

²³ See Richard Ned Lebow, 'Reason divorced from reality: Thomas Schelling and strategic bargaining', *International Politics* 43: 4, Autumn 2006, pp. 429–52.

²⁴ Matthew Swibel, 'The humvee's \$100 billion replacement', *Forbes*, 14 May 2008, https://www.forbes.com/2008/05/13/marines-humvee-army-biz-wash-cz_ms_0413beltway.html.

²⁵ Frank G. Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21st century: the rise of hybrid wars* (Arlington, VA: Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, 2007).

²⁶ Rebecca Khell, 'McCain slams \$13B in Pentagon spending in latest waste report', *The Hill*, 19 Dec. 2016, http://thehill.com/policy/defense/311066-mccain-slams-13b-in-pentagon-spending-in-latest-waste-report?utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=New%20Campaign&utm_term=%2ASituation%20Report.

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backtracked from that position in the face of newly discovered, often countervailing, pressures. He retreated from excoriating China as a currency manipulator, for example, because of security considerations in north-east Asia.²⁷

Yet despite these new features, American presidents, strategists and military planners are still expected to offer a single grand strategy that anticipates all eventualities and offers effective responses within the bounds of the (albeit enormous) defence budget. And the branches of America's armed forces are expected to implement that grand strategy.

Military officials, however, are often more aware than elected officials and civilian strategists of inherent operational limitations. Indeed, from that perspective, it is hard to escape the conclusion that these contingencies circumscribe strategy rather than being defined by it. If that is correct, the expertise and experience of the current or former military officers—Generals James Mattis and John Kelly, or Lieutenant-General H. R. McMaster—who hold senior positions in the Trump administration may moderate the instincts of political advisers such as Steve Bannon who advocate a one-dimensional form of America firstism, or indeed any other form of grand strategy.²⁸ Conversely, the prominence of military officers in the administration has prompted experts across the political spectrum to worry about the militarization of American foreign policy.²⁹

Any effort at a unified strategy is further complicated by the elaborate bureaucratic processes that any president encounters when dealing with military operations. Longstanding theories of bureaucratic politics and civil–military relations recognize this predicament when it comes to the formation and implementation of policy.³⁰ And the massive growth of the American national security state apparatus since 9/11 reinforces the point.³¹ But few scholars have linked either of these elements—a comprehensive understanding of threats, actors and the nature of war or bureaucratic politics—to grand strategy.³² In contrast, scholars, policy-makers and pundits generally formulate and advocate their preferred grand strategy in

²⁷ Mark Lander, 'As Trump bets on China's help on North Korea, aides ask: is it worth it?', *New York Times*, 15 June 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/15/world/asia/china-xi-jinping-trump-north-korea.html?_r=0.

²⁸ Max Fisher, 'Stephen K. Bannon's CPAC comments, annotated and explained', *New York Times*, 24 Feb. 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/24/us/politics/stephen-bannon-cpac-speech.html?_r=0.

²⁹ Eric Gomez, 'Trump's first 100 days and the deepening militarization of US foreign policy', *CATO at Liberty*, 28 April 2017, <https://www.cato.org/blog/trumps-first-100-days-deepening-militarization-us-foreign-policy>.

³⁰ The literature in these fields is voluminous. For work on bureaucracies in this context, see as examples Robert Jervis, 'US grand strategy: mission impossible', *Naval War College Review*, Summer 1998, pp. 22–36; Harvey M. Sapolsky, Eugene Gholz and Caitlin Talmadge, *US defense politics the origins of security policy*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2014), pp. 13–31; Nathan D. Luther, 'Bureaucracies: the enemy within', *US Naval Institute Proceedings* 132: 2, Feb. 2006, pp. 236; for relevant testimony, see Eliot A. Cohen, 'Global challenges, US national security strategy, and defense organization', testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, 22 Oct. 2015, p. 4, http://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Cohen_10-22-15.pdf. For work on civil–military relations, notable examples include Suzanne Christine Nielsen, 'Civil–military relations theory and military effectiveness', *Public Administration and Management* 10: 2, 2005, pp. 61–84; Eliot A. Cohen, *Supreme command: soldiers, statesmen, and leadership in wartime* (New York: Free Press, 2002); Peter Feaver, 'Civil–military relations', *Annual Review of Political Science* 2, 1999, pp. 211–41; Peter Feaver, *Choosing your battles: American civil–military relations and the use of force* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); Peter Feaver, *Armed servants: agency, oversight, and civil–military relations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

³¹ Reich and Dombrowski, *The end of grand strategy*, chs 1–2.

³² As in many areas, Colin Gray is an exception. See e.g. Colin Gray, *The strategy bridge: theory for practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2011), ch. 6.

the abstract, ignoring the constraints imposed by institutional processes, organizational cultures and long decision-making chains that plague implementation. They simply assume that presidents can articulate principles and specify goals that can be implemented. All such analyses therefore entail a certain hubris: that the US can design a blueprint and the rest of the world will have to adapt to it,³³ whether it takes the form of a global primacist strategy heavily reliant on the threat or use of unilateral force, a liberal institutionalist one (often labelled ‘cooperative security’), or any other variant across a spectrum of options including an isolationist strategy of ‘America first’, with its emphasis on sovereignty and border control.³⁴

In challenging the validity of that approach, we do not suggest that presidential leadership never matters in the formulation and implementation of foreign policy. We recognize that what presidents say, and the policies that they initiate, have an impact, as the recent creation of a temporary travel ban vividly illustrates. Furthermore, it is important in setting a tone—and can thereby affect levels of trust in the United States, as a recent Pew global public opinion poll demonstrates, with tangible consequences as others react.³⁵

Furthermore, presidents can, and often do, make landmark decisions to abandon projects. Recent examples of such institutional casualties include the Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement and the Paris climate change agreement (both withdrawals being consistent with an isolationist strategy and the latter uniformly opposed by the leaders of the G20)—although even here Trump’s decision may be mitigated by the policies of individual US states, the vicissitudes of the marketplace for fossil fuels and the postponement of the withdrawal itself until after the next presidential election.³⁶ Decisions to withdraw from agreements, often driven by domestic political calculations,³⁷ are easier to institute when three conditions are met: they can be effected by Executive order; no concrete strategy has already been implemented, so that commitment of resources is limited; and the threats involved are poorly defined. Both of the agreements mentioned above met these conditions, being redefined by Trump as themselves posing threats to job security. It is harder to shift strategy when it comes to less malleably defined threats, such as illicit smuggling, terrorism, and conventional and nuclear warfare—examples we discuss below. That point is illustrated by the fact that Trump has repeatedly, albeit unrealistically, tried to redefine Russia as a partner rather than a threat, as

³³ James Carden, ‘Grand strategy is bunk: theories of global power just excuse US hubris’, *American Conservative*, 3 Dec. 2014, <http://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/grand-strategy-is-bunk/>.

³⁴ For a presentation of six major options see Reich and Dombrowski, *The end of grand strategy*, Appendix 1, pp. 181–2.

³⁵ See Richard Wike, Bruce Stokes, Jacob Poushter and Janell Fetterolf, ‘US image suffers as publics around the world question Trump’s leadership’, Pew Research Center, *Global Attitudes and Trends*, 26 June 2017, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2017/06/26/u-s-image-suffers-as-publics-around-world-question-trumps-leadership/>.

³⁶ Michael Birnbaum and Damian Paletta, ‘Trump leaves leaders fearing the future as G20 summit closes’, *Washington Post*, 8 July 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-leaves-leaders-fearing-the-future-as-g-20-summit-breaks/2017/07/08/daed41be-634f-11e7-84a1-a26b75ad39fe_story.html?utm_term=.f7b500360a48&wpisrc=nl_most&wpm=1.

³⁷ Peter Baker, ‘Trump abandons Trans-Pacific Partnership, Obama’s signature trade deal’, *New York Times*, 23 Jan. 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/23/us/politics/tpp-trump-trade-nafta.html>; Peter Baker, ‘In rejecting popular Paris Accord, Trump bets on his base’, *New York Times*, 1 June 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/01/climate/paris-accord-trump-conservative-base.html>.

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he did again at the G20 summit in July 2017.³⁸ Neither the US public nor Trump's own senior officials support this redefinition, and military operations that generate friction with Russia have continued unabated.³⁹

Our central question, however, concerns the significance of rhetoric and policy shifts in respect of the implementation of strategy—relative to external pressures and internal institutional constraints. The first pair of factors undeniably represents important elements of foreign affairs. But when it comes to operational strategies, there is a risk of overstating the importance of presidential leadership—and understating how much the latter pair goads presidents into solutions that undermine any single formulation as well as their attempts to change course from well-developed strategies. What Obama infamously termed the 'Washington Playbook', with its reliance on a well-worn set of policy prescriptions, may be more a reflection of strategic limitations than of presidential failings, policy choices or a lack of imagination.⁴⁰

From grand to calibrated strategies

In contrast to conventional wisdom, then, we argue that over the past two decades America has increasingly implemented a series of calibrated strategies. Their selection is highly context-dependent, but several are routinely employed: from primacy and unilateralism to multilateral 'deep engagement';⁴¹ from 'restraint', with its focus on reduced overseas commitments while attempting to control the commons of air, sea and space,⁴² to Stephen Bannon's current version of isolationism.⁴³

That is why, beyond the loud rhetoric or policy pronouncements, elements of strategic continuity are often more prevalent than those of abrupt change. And it may be why Trump has often found it far harder to initiate dramatic changes in foreign policy than he imagined on the campaign trail. The use of Executive orders domestically may be limited by America's institutional division of powers and a judicial system that curtails the president's capacity to impose change. But even these constraints may not be as insurmountable as the obstacles to getting North Korean dictators, Somali pirates or Latin American criminal organiza-

³⁸ Gardiner Harris, 'US, Russia and Jordan reach deal for cease-fire in part of Syria', *New York Times*, 7 July 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/07/us/politics/syria-ceasefire-agreement.html?hp&action=click&pgtype=Homepage&clickSource=story-heading&module=first-column-region®ion=top-news&WT.nav=top-news&_r=0.

³⁹ Karlyn Bowman, 'Americans' views on Russia, NATO, and foreign policy under President Trump', *Forbes*, 13 March 2017, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/bowmanmarsico/2017/03/13/americans-views-on-russia-nato-and-foreign-policy-under-president-trump/#1600ddc5079>; Ewen MacAskill, 'Russia is a "strategic competitor" to the West, says James Mattis', *Guardian*, 31 March 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/31/russia-strategic-competitor-to-west-james-mattis>.

⁴⁰ Barack Obama, quoted in Jeffrey Goldberg, 'The Obama Doctrine', *The Atlantic*, April 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/>.

⁴¹ Brooks and Wohlforth, *America abroad*; Condoleezza Rice, *Democracy: stories from the long road to freedom* (New York: Twelve, 2017).

⁴² Posen, *Restraint*.

⁴³ Krishnadev Calamur, 'A short history of "America First": the phrase used by President Trump has been linked to anti-Semitism during World War II', *Atlantic Monthly*, 21 Jan. 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/01/trump-america-first/514037/>.

tions to change their behaviour. Trump's rhetoric and proposed foreign policy pronouncements have often significantly departed from Obama's and have alienated many allies. But the operational differences over the first six months of his presidency are far less dramatic. As one *New York Times* headline suggested—perhaps prematurely, given that the new administration was barely two weeks old at the time: 'Trump embraces pillars of Obama's foreign policy'.⁴⁴ Such evaluations recur. Almost four months later, for example, another headline suggested that 'Trump's "secret plan" to defeat ISIS looks a lot like Obama's'.⁴⁵

This may be unsurprising when current or former military leaders are left to formulate and implement calibrated strategies. Their tendency is to refer to a tried and trusted set of alternatives based on the actors, threats and form of warfare that have hitherto prevailed. Existing national security processes tend to reinforce continuity rather than to embrace radical changes proposed by outsiders, even the commander-in-chief.

We recognize that we cannot comprehensively defend our claim in an article of this length, although we do so elsewhere in examining six major military activities.⁴⁶ In the section that follows, we illustrate our claims by offering just three brief examples of Trump's calibrated strategies in the first six months of 2017 that largely sustain or build upon existing strategies from the Bush and Obama eras.

Trump's first six months

Donald Trump's 'America first' platform has been only selectively evident to date. Various areas of foreign policy have reflected alternative grand strategic formulations—including both a 'leadership' strategy and a 'primacist' one. In this section, we briefly examine three key examples of strategic operations drawn from Trump's first six months in office, all of which reveal a gap of varying magnitude between rhetoric and an operational strategy. The first, concerning border control, not surprisingly reflects an isolationist strategy. Here the language approximates to the strategy. The second, concerning NATO, is symptomatic of a liberal leadership strategy—where American military rotations and command and control have been sustained despite the evident divisions that have emerged between Trump and Europe's major leaders. In this case, there is an evident gap between the rhetoric and strategy. And the third, concerning North Korea, bears the hallmarks of a primacist strategy, despite Trump's rhetoric about engaging China in thwarting North Korea's nuclear ambitions. Here, Trump has adapted his pre-election rhetoric to strategic circumstances. This variation in operational

⁴⁴ Mark Landler, Peter Baker and David E. Sanger, 'Trump embraces pillars of Obama's foreign policy', *New York Times*, 2 Feb. 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/02/world/middleeast/iran-missile-test-trump.html>.

⁴⁵ Brian P. McKeon, 'Trump's "secret plan" to defeat ISIS looks a lot like Obama's', *Foreign Policy*, 31 May 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/05/31/trumps-secret-plan-to-defeat-isis-looks-a-lot-like-obamas/>.

⁴⁶ Reich and Dombrowski, *The end of grand strategy*, chapters 3–8 cover maritime activities including keeping the Strait of Hormuz open; maritime interdiction operations in support of the Proliferation Security Initiative; counter-piracy operations off the coast of Somalia; multilateral maritime exercises in the Indo-Pacific; counter-narcotics operations along the maritime approaches to the southern United States; and, potentially, increasing maritime capabilities in the Arctic.

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strategies supports our argument: that the strategies employed vary, and that, to understand these choices, we must cut through the critical rhetoric to examine actual strategic behaviour.

Isolationism, 'bad hombres' and extreme vetting

This example is the most obvious place to start, given that the isolation it represents was Trump's default grand strategic position. And, to the extent possible, he has kept to his word. The crucible of this strategy has been his administration's highly contentious immigration policy. It has had two components.

The first has focused on the flow of undocumented migrants. That itself has two elements. One is the continued planning of the construction of a wall along America's southern border.⁴⁷ The former Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security, now White House Chief of Staff, John Kelly, has conceded that 'we are not going to be able to build a wall everywhere at once'.⁴⁸ Furthermore, there have been doubts about whether it will be a continuous physical wall or partially composed of electronic sensors.⁴⁹ And there have been questions about who is going to pay for it and how. Certainly, the Mexican government has made its position clear: it will not do so. Nonetheless, resolving those questions does not detract from the policy's key isolationist elements.

The administration's goals have been contentious and the language, at times, acidic. But, when judged against US operations since 9/11, goals and language alike do not represent a fundamental change in American strategy. The emphasis on a physical wall represents a symbolic and tactical difference in Trump's approach to border security, rather than a change in objective from either Bush's or Obama's. They primarily focused on increasing the number of personnel charged with thwarting illicit entry, rather than on constructing a physical barrier. But they shared the same isolationist approach to border flows. The Trump administration now appears to be following a similar pattern (albeit far more aggressively and abrasively).

Some figures will substantiate this assertion. The federal government's budget for customs and border protection (CBP) increased by 91 per cent between 2003 and 2014, from US\$6.6 billion to US\$12.4 billion. Similarly, the number of (land-based) border agents over that decade almost doubled, from 10,717 to 21,391.⁵⁰ Bush's efforts to fund a comprehensive border wall in 2006 failed, although 700

⁴⁷ See Anu Joshi, 'Donald Trump's border wall—an annotated timeline', *Huffington Post*, 1 March 2017, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/donald-trumps-border-wall-an-annotated-timeline_us_58b5f363e4b02f3f81e44d7b.

⁴⁸ Brian Bennett, 'Homeland Security Secretary says a border wall won't be built all at once', *Los Angeles Times*, 7 Feb. 2017, <http://www.latimes.com/politics/la-na-pol-kelly-travel-ban-20170207-story.html>.

⁴⁹ Steve Chapman, 'Trump's wall is already collapsing', *Chicago Tribune*, 31 March 2017, <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/opinion/chapman/ct-mexico-border-wall-trump-chapman-perspec-0402-md-20170331-col-umn.html>.

⁵⁰ Pew Charitable Trusts, *Immigration enforcement along US borders and at ports of entry: federal, state, and local efforts*, brief, Feb. 2015, p. 1 and figure 1, p. 4, http://www.pewtrusts.org/~media/assets/2015/02/borderenforcement_brief_web.pdf.

miles of it was constructed.⁵¹ Nor should this dramatic budget growth be wholly ascribed to Bush. In the Obama administration's final year, the homeland security budget for fiscal year 2016 endorsed hiring over 2,000 more CBP officers to take the figure to 23,871. It also advocated increasing the Coast Guard's recapitalization budget for maritime protection,

to include US\$340 million for production of six Fast Response Cutters; US\$102 million to convert Air National Guard C-27J aircraft for Coast Guard use; US\$91.4 million for National Security Cutter structural enhancement and post-delivery activities; and US\$18.5 million to complete preliminary design evaluation of the Offshore Patrol Cutter.⁵²

Trump's proposed wall may be a more naked symbol of border control. But it differs more symbolically than operationally from his predecessors' measures.

The second element of Trump's response to the flow of undocumented migrants, coupled with the attempt to reduce inward flows, has been an increase in mass deportations, an alarming development for migrant communities in the United States. Yet Trump's harsh rhetoric, his purported expansion of immigration and customs enforcement (ICE) personnel, and his supposed novel focus on non-criminal undocumented migrants mask an underlying reality: prior administrations also focused on the deportation of both criminal and non-criminal undocumented immigrants. The ICE annual budget has more than doubled since 2003, from an initial base of US\$3.3 billion, as has the number of ICE agents.⁵³ Trump's claim that he will increase the number of ICE agents extends a trend rather than reversing one.

Furthermore, the operational use of those agents—and against whom—represents continuity rather than change. As Elliot Young suggests:

Trump's Executive Orders on immigration, his expansion of who is defined as a criminal and his rhetoric about 'bad hombres' are a departure from Obama, but not as much as we might like to believe ... The mainstream media keeps repeating the falsehood that Obama focused on deporting serious criminals ... The data from the Department of Homeland Security tells a very different story. From 2009–2015, 56% of all immigrants removed from the country had no criminal convictions. The preliminary data from 2016, when Obama was still in office, suggests that this trend of deporting non-criminals continued. What's more, a good portion of the so-called criminal deportees were arrested on low-level misdemeanor charges such as marijuana possession.⁵⁴

In fact, the proportion of non-criminals deported during the Obama presidency consistently reached over 50 per cent. That proportion did decline in the latter years of the Obama administration; but as Young notes, 'even in 2015, over 40

⁵¹ Julia Jacobo and Serena Marshall, 'Nearly 700 miles of fencing at the US–Mexico border already exist', ABC News, 26 Jan. 2017, <http://abcnews.go.com/US/700-miles-fencing-us-mexico-border-exist/story?id=45045054>.

⁵² Quotation and other details from US Department of Homeland Security, *Budget-in-brief, fiscal year 2016*, p. 4, <https://www.dhs.gov/publication/fy-2016-budget-brief>.

⁵³ US Department of Homeland Security, *Budget-in-brief, fiscal years 2005–14*; American Immigration Council, *The growth of the US deportation machine*, March 2014, p. 5, https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/sites/default/files/research/the_growth_of_the_us_deportation_machine.pdf.

⁵⁴ Elliot Young, 'The hard truths about Obama's deportation policies', *Huffington Post*, 1 March 2017, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/hard-truths-about-obamas-deportation-priorities_us_58b3c9e7e4b0658fc20f979e.

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percent of ICE removals had no criminal conviction and of the 59 percent who did, many were guilty of minor charges'. As Derooy Murdock reports:

According to a document titled 'FY 2016 ICE Immigration Removals', the federal government deported 2,749,706 aliens between fiscal years 2009 and 2016—on Obama's watch. This averaged 343,713 deportees annually ... In fiscal year 2016 alone, Obama's ICE kicked out 240,255 aliens, including 136,669 criminal convicts. However, the report says, '101,586 aliens removed ... had no criminal conviction'.⁵⁵

Trump's purported reassignment of immigration judges, intended to speed up the deportation process, has clearly had a chilling effect. It may even partially account for the reputed slowdown of newly arriving undocumented migrants. And the number of ICE immigration arrests of non-criminals under Trump may have more than doubled in the first three months of his administration, as overall immigrant arrests rose by 38 per cent, with 30,500 of the total of 41,300 arrested having criminal convictions, according to ICE figures. Yet, paradoxically, the number of actual deportations fell during the same period by 12 per cent, possibly as a result of the kind of bureaucratic problems we noted earlier.⁵⁶ Obama's last budget sought to increase the number of ICE detention beds to 34,000 and 'supervise approximately 87,000 individuals a day (involving intensive supervision or electronic monitoring) for those not considered a high-risk to the community'.⁵⁷ The Trump administration didn't act on that budget request, and so is now prevented from facilitating more deportations by lack of resources. Nonetheless, these figures suggest that the volume and velocity of deportations may be changing under Trump. But the strategy's substance has not.

Where the Obama and Trump administrations have clearly differed is in the Trump administration's efforts to introduce a ban on visitors from (first seven and then) six predominantly Muslim countries, and to invoke 'extreme vetting' for foreign visitors and visa applicants, for both economic and security reasons.⁵⁸ This includes, according to Kelly, investigating their internet activity and screening their mobile devices,⁵⁹ initiatives he described as 'essential'.⁶⁰

⁵⁵ Derooy Murdock, 'Trump's immigration approach is less draconian than Obama's', *National Review*, 24 Feb. 2017, <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/445213/trump-administrato-in-immigration-guidelines-deportations-illegal-aliens-obama-administration-canada-sweden>. See also Leighton Akio Woodhouse, 'Obama's deportation strategy was even worse than we thought', *Intercept*, 15 May 2017, <https://theintercept.com/2017/05/15/obamas-deportation-policy-was-even-worse-than-we-thought/>.

⁵⁶ Amy Taxin, 'US: immigrant arrests soar under Trump, fewer deported', *apnews.com*, 17 May 2017, <https://apnews.com/b037c71e2f6b4b438e98ac954af505d9>; Maria Sacchetti, 'ICE immigration arrests of noncriminals double under Trump', *Washington Post*, 16 April 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/immigration-arrests-of-noncriminals-double-under-trump/2017/04/16/98a2f1e2-2096-11e7-be2a-3a1fb24d4671_story.html?utm_term=.701b8eba2861.

⁵⁷ US Department of Homeland Security, *Budget-in-brief, fiscal year 2016*, p. 5.

⁵⁸ Tracey Jan and Max Ehrenfreund, 'After a series of flip-flops, Trump prepares to deliver on a key campaign pledge', *Washington Post*, 17 April 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2017/04/17/after-a-series-of-flip-flops-trump-prepares-to-deliver-on-a-key-campaign-pledge/?utm_term=.e5c97dod8961.

⁵⁹ Quote from Gary Shapiro, 'The Trump administration might put the "extreme" in "extreme vetting"', *Washington Post*, 17 April 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-trump-administration-might-put-the-extreme-in-extreme-vetting/2017/04/17/8e81f7ca-1ecb-11e7-be2a-3a1fb24d4671_story.html?utm_term=.02cce3e257f6.

⁶⁰ 'Face the Nation transcript April 23, 2017: Rubio, Kelly, Sanders, Kasich', CBS News, *Face the Nation*, 23 April 2017, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/face-the-nation-transcript-april-23-2017-rubio-kelly-sanders-kasich/>.

The regulation of illicit flows is the contemporary bedrock of isolationism. It is among the most publicized and contested of Trump's strategies. These measures have a potential or actual and immediate impact on various domestic constituencies. The banning or extreme vetting, applied more broadly, critics contend, may also have an impact on America's diplomatic relations abroad. To date, however, this has not deterred the administration, despite obstacles and limitations created by the court system and some state and city governments. The Supreme Court's decisions to adjudicate on the second ban, and meanwhile to temporarily prevent some of its proposed restrictions from being enforced, have nonetheless been reinterpreted as a victory by Trump.⁶¹ If sustained by the court, this emerging strategy will be costly. It will require massive spending on building a comprehensive 'wall' and enlarging the number of law enforcement personnel.⁶² Nonetheless, it reflects one avowed strategy, firmly rooted in those pursued by his predecessors.

Liberal leadership and NATO

Trump's administration has simultaneously pursued alternative, calibrated strategies built on markedly different principles. Among the comments he made when campaigning, those that shook the Washington and transatlantic security communities were his denunciations of NATO and its members—what his National Security Adviser H. R. McMaster subsequently characterized as 'tough love' simply intended to make the alliance 'stronger'.⁶³ The most extreme implications of Trump's campaign statements—pulling the US out of NATO or not honouring Article 5 commitments for those members who have not met their financial obligations—would represent a cataclysmic break from America's traditional grand strategy from President Truman onwards.

The US reaffirmed its commitment to Europe at the end of the Cold War. One plank of this reaffirmation was legislation, such as the Support for East European Democracy (SEED) of 1989 and the Freedom Support Act (FSA) of 1992, that encouraged the post-communist economic and political transitions in eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.⁶⁴ Another was the controversial decision to extend NATO membership to former Warsaw Pact members and Soviet Socialist

⁶¹ Michael D. Shear, 'Supreme Court takes up travel ban case, and allows parts to go ahead', *New York Times*, 26 June 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/26/us/politics/supreme-court-trump-travel-ban-case.html?hp&action=click&pgtype=Homepage&clickSource=story-heading&module=first-column-region®ion=top-news&WT.nav=top-news&_r=0.

⁶² Sydney J. Freedberg, Jr, 'Coast Guard dodges big Trump budget bullet; but coasties fix roofs', *Breaking Defense*, 12 April 2017, <http://breakingdefense.com/2017/04/coast-guard-dodges-big-trump-budget-bullet-but-coasties-fixing-roofs/>.

⁶³ Quoted in Greg Jaffe, 'National Security Adviser McMaster defends Trump's approach with allies as "tough love"', *Washington Post*, 28 June 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/national-security-adviser-mcmaster-defends-trumps-approach-with-allies-as-tough-love/2017/06/28/bo866740-5c40-11e7-9b7d-14576dc0f39d_story.html?utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=New%20Campaign&utm_term=%2ASituation%20Report.

⁶⁴ In this the US was joined by its European partners and allies; see the essays in Karen Dawisha, *The international dimensions of post-communist transitions in Russia and the new states of Eurasia* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1997). For more on the American role, see Peter Dombrowski and Patricia Davis, 'International assistance to the former Soviet Union: transitions and conditions', *Policy Studies Journal* 28: 1, 2000, pp. 68–95.

Republics. That linkage was further solidified by NATO's response to 9/11, including, for the first time, the invocation of Article 5 in defence of the United States. Indeed, the US, NATO and the entire European security community devoted nearly two decades to resolving thorny issues to do with the alliance, including out-of-area operations and the fate of American troops still stationed in Europe.⁶⁵

Clearly, Trump's rhetoric about NATO being obsolete (an assertion subsequently retracted), his delayed—and then belated—endorsement of Article 5 in June,⁶⁶ and his proposed *rapprochement* with Russia potentially hollow out the core of this relationship.⁶⁷ From this perspective, an assertion of strategic continuity would appear questionable. Indeed, Trump officials implicitly recognize the danger of seeming to undermine NATO. Three of Trump's most senior foreign and security policy advisers—Vice-President Mike Pence, Secretary of Defense James Mattis and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson—all journeyed to Europe to reassure NATO allies. Moreover, General Curtis M. Scaparrotti, the current Supreme Allied Commander Europe, crisscrossed the continent offering a message that the Trump administration would sustain American commitments and responsibilities.

Indeed, American military operations and ongoing activities, suggest a far more limited change in the relationship between the US and NATO than Trump's inflammatory rhetoric suggests. As H. R. McMaster noted, by the end of June the US had spent more than \$1 billion 'to bolster NATO forces on the fringes of Europe'.⁶⁸ Furthermore, the President could have unilaterally reversed activities previously planned by the Obama administration, sending an unmistakable message to alliance members. He chose not to, however, signalling his true intentions.

Notably, the European Reassurance Initiative (ERI) and Operation Atlantic Resolve,⁶⁹ both launched in 2014, continued unabated in the winter and spring of 2017. The US participated in numerous Operation Atlantic Resolve activities, including rotational deployments of aircraft and warships, joint and combined military exercises, and various other efforts to better prepare allies for potential Russian aggression. When on 25 April, for example, Washington announced it was sending two F-35A fourth-generation fighter aircraft to Europe to take part in a month-long series of military exercises, the move was explained as simply fulfilling a prior US commitment to the ERI.⁷⁰ The same was true of military

⁶⁵ James M. Goldgeier, *Not whether but when: the US decision to enlarge NATO* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution, 2010); Andrew T. Wolff, 'The future of NATO enlargement after the Ukraine crisis', *International Affairs* 91: 5, Sept. 2015, pp. 1103–22; Sten Rynning, 'The divide: France, Germany and political NATO', *International Affairs* 93: 2, March 2015, pp. 267–90; Tracey German, 'NATO and the enlargement debate: enhancing Euro-Atlantic security or inciting confrontation?', *International Affairs* 93: 2, March 2015, pp. 291–308.

⁶⁶ Alex Ward, 'Trump just committed to NATO's Article 5, finally', *Vox*, 9 June 2017, <https://www.vox.com/world/2017/6/9/15772292/trump-article-5-nato-commit>.

⁶⁷ 'President Trump confirms his commitment to NATO's Article 5 mutual defense pact', Associated Press, 9 June 2017, <http://time.com/4813299/donald-trump-nato-article-5/>.

⁶⁸ Quoted in Jaffe, 'National security adviser McMaster defends Trump's approach with allies as "tough love"', *Washington Post*, 28 June 2017.

⁶⁹ For up-to-date news regarding Operation Atlantic Resolve, see US Department of Defense webpage, 'America's continued commitment to European security: Operation Atlantic Resolve', https://www.defense.gov/News/Special-Reports/0514_Atlanctic-Resolve/.

⁷⁰ Courtney Albon, 'Final two F-35As arrive for Europe training deployment', *InsideDefense.com*, 25 April 2017, <https://insidedefense.com/daily-news/final-two-f-35as-arrive-europe-training-deployment>.

exercises in Poland and Romania. More significantly, the deployment of heavy rotational army brigades promised by President Obama remains on track.⁷¹

Furthermore, a range of American forces rotated into Europe during the summer of 2017, including National Guard units, B-2 bombers and B-1B bombers.⁷² The US Army summarized its activities as involving armoured and aviation brigade rotations (including a 4th Infantry Division Mission Command Element, a 3rd Armored Brigade Combat Team and the 10th Combat Aviation Brigade); other smaller army units having a persistent and continuous presence in the Black Sea region; increasing the army's prepositioned stocks of munitions and materials; and enhanced forward presence activities falling under NATO control.⁷³ Meanwhile, Baltops 2017, the latest iteration of the annual American-led multinational maritime exercise, has taken on a new urgency as tensions increased between Russia, NATO and the other northern European states including Finland and Sweden; for two weeks 50 ships and 50 aircraft—sourced from the US, the UK, and twelve continental countries including France and Germany—participated in exercises designed to prepare for high-end war-fighting. The exercises included mine hunting, air defence, anti-submarine warfare and beach landings.⁷⁴ Underlying these efforts are the ongoing commitments of United States European Command (EUCOM) under the ERI to: increase the rotational presence of air, ground and sea forces; add bilateral and multilateral exercises; upgrade training and improve infrastructure to allow for greater responsiveness; enhance the prepositioning of US equipment; and intensify partner capacity-building.⁷⁵

To summarize, in testimony before the US Senate Armed Services Committee in March, General Scaparrotti emphasized that:

We cannot meet these challenges alone. In response to Russian aggression, EUCOM has continued to strengthen our relationship with strategic allies and partners, including the Baltic nations, Poland, Turkey, and Ukraine. EUCOM has also strengthened ties with Israel, one of our closest allies. Above all, EUCOM has supported the NATO Alliance, which remains, as Secretary Mattis said, the 'bedrock' of our transatlantic security.⁷⁶

Secretary of Defense Mattis has also continually emphasized the sustained US commitment to NATO, notably as a bulwark against Russian aggression and terrorist threats. At a meeting of NATO defence ministers in Brussels in late June, he stressed the importance of NATO's enhanced forward presence operations ('battlegroups') in the Baltic republics and Poland, composed of forces from framework nations—Canada, Germany, the UK and the US—and 15 other NATO

⁷¹ John R. Deni, 'Modifying America's forward presence in eastern Europe', *Parameters* 46: 1, Spring 2016, pp. 35–42, https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/pubs/parameters/issues/Spring_2016/Vol46_No1.pdf.

⁷² US Department of Defense, *Special report on Operation Atlantic Resolve* (n.d.), https://www.defense.gov/News/Special-Reports/0514_Atlantic-Resolve/.

⁷³ US Army Europe Public Affairs Office, Atlantic Resolve fact sheet, <http://www.eur.army.mil/AtlanticResolve/>.

⁷⁴ Magnus Nordenman, 'NATO and US Baltic Sea exercises highlight ongoing tensions with Russian forces', USNI News, 7 July 2017.

⁷⁵ US European Command Public Affairs Office, European Reassurance Initiative (ERI) fact sheet.

⁷⁶ 2017 Senate Armed Services Committee, opening statement and full transcript as delivered by General Curtis Scaparrotti, US European Command, Washington DC, 23 March 2017, <http://www.eucom.mil/media-library/transcript/35612/2017-sasc-opening-statement-and-full-transcript-as-delivered-by-general-curtis-scaparrotti>.

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members. Mattis re-emphasized the administration's commitment by praising the US Senate's unanimous support for the US\$1.4 billion increase in the ERI's budget contained in the President's fiscal 2018 defence budget.⁷⁷

Characteristically, President Trump has had the last word on NATO: 'I said it was Obsolete. It is No Longer Obsolete.'⁷⁸ Yet the President remains dissatisfied with the financial contribution of most alliance members, and is particularly concerned with whether they have embarked on meeting an earlier commitment to increase their defence spending towards the target of 2 per cent of their GDP by 2024. Trump expressed his concerns at a NATO summit in Brussels:

I have been very, very direct with Secretary Stoltenberg and members of the Alliance in saying that NATO members must finally contribute their fair share and meet their financial obligations ... This is not fair to the people and taxpayers of the United States. And many of these nations owe massive amounts of money from past years ... If all NATO members had spent just 2 percent of their GDP on defense last year, we would have had another \$119 billion for our collective defense and for the financing of additional NATO reserves.⁷⁹

In that speech, delivered at an event dedicated to celebrating Article 5, Trump failed to mention the United States' future commitment to collective defence. And he reinforced this blunt approach by subsequently raising the issue of trade deficits with several allies, but most pointedly with Germany.⁸⁰

Such posturing, however, does not mean the United States is prepared to abandon NATO. As usual, Trump's aides were left to clarify Washington's intentions, with General McMaster reaffirming the US commitment to Article 5: 'I think it's extraordinary that there would be an expectation that the president would have to say explicitly that he supports Article 5. Of course he does.'⁸¹ Trump, nonetheless, did so, if belatedly. Moreover, on his next European trip, to Poland and Germany in July 2017, Trump publicly clarified that he was not wavering on America's adherence to Article 5.⁸²

More broadly, while Trump's comments represent an extreme version, burden-sharing debates and squabbles are not unusual. Indeed, though this tends to be widely forgotten, they are the norm in NATO.⁸³ And for Americans, the limited

⁷⁷ Jim Garamone, 'Mattis pleased with NATO progress deterring Russia, combating terror', Department of Defense, 29 June 2017, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/1234053/>.

⁷⁸ Quoted in Peter Baker, 'Trump's previous view of NATO is now obsolete', *New York Times*, 13 April 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/13/world/europe/nato-trump.html>.

⁷⁹ The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 'Remarks by President Trump at NATO unveiling of the Article 5 and Berlin Wall memorials—Brussels, Belgium', 25 May 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/05/25/remarks-president-trump-nato-unveiling-article-5-and-berlin-wall>.

⁸⁰ Wade Jacoby, 'President Trump just threatened Germany over trade. Here's what you need to know', *Washington Post*, 30 May 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/05/30/donald-trump-just-threatened-germany-over-trade-heres-what-you-need-to-know/?utm_term=.a7b4dac0c866.

⁸¹ 'McMaster says "of course" Trump supports NATO Article 5', Reuters, 27 May 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-g7-summit-nato-idUSKBN18NoLV>.

⁸² Dan Merica, Kevin Liptak and Jeff Zeleny, 'Trump, showered in Polish praise, backs NATO's Article 5', CNN, 6 July 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2017/07/06/politics/trump-speech-poland/index.html>.

⁸³ Slobodan Lekic, 'Trump's claims on NATO burden-sharing have long history', *Stars and Stripes*, 30 July 2016, https://www.stripes.com/news/trump-s-claims-on-nato-burden-sharing-have-long-history-1.421645#.WRtK7lK-K_g.

budgetary contribution of most NATO members is a bipartisan issue. President Obama, for example, chided NATO's other members over this issue at the Warsaw summit in the summer of 2016.⁸⁴ Even Hillary Clinton—ever a supporter of NATO—did the same when a presidential candidate.⁸⁵

The German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, reacted to early uncertainties regarding American intentions by suggesting that the Trump administration's behaviour meant that Europe must be more self-reliant, and 'take our fate into our own hands'.⁸⁶ Read closely, however, the Chancellor's words imply not (necessarily) the end of NATO, but rather an alliance less reliant on American leadership.

Any such judgement may be premature. The Trump administration's behaviour can certainly be interpreted in two ways. Rhetorically, it appears to eschew a leadership position—if that is defined as being willing to bear a grossly disproportionate fiscal burden while using a gentler form of diplomacy in prodding members to meet their commitments. Alternatively, if leadership is defined as occasionally forcing partners to make difficult choices—and is thus construed as pushing long-reluctant European members to spend more on defence while sustaining American operations in NATO—it suggests greater continuity than the discordant rhetoric implies. Clearly, the operational behaviour of American forces suggests NATO's collective security remains intact.

In sum, the evidence suggests that the United States has no intention of withdrawing from the alliance any time soon, and states not contributing 2 per cent of their GDP (according to the commitment made in 2006 and reaffirmed in 2014) will still be guaranteed the protection embedded in Article 5. Despite Trump's repeated efforts at *rapprochement* with Moscow and his meeting with Putin in Hamburg, Russia remains, by consensus, the primary threat to all NATO members—a view reinforced by Russia's aggressive posturing across a broad swath of Eurasia from the Arctic to the Black Sea. As Mattis explained in his written response to the Senate Armed Service Committee for his confirmation hearing:

The Alliance must harness renewed political will to confront and walk back aggressive Russian actions and other threats to the security of its members. It will face a critical challenge in maintaining solidarity on issues related to deterrence, defense, and the projection of stability in support of the North Atlantic community's interests.⁸⁷

Four months later, Mattis espoused the same view, loudly echoed in a major Pentagon report on Russia—and buttressed by the introduction of further sanctions against Russia by the US Senate on 15 June (including provisions ensuring that Trump could not lift them).⁸⁸

⁸⁴ Ayesha Rascoe and Yeganeh Torbati, 'Burden sharing woes to cloud Obama's trip to NATO summit', Reuters, 6 July 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-nato-summit-obama-idUSKCN0ZM2KX>.

⁸⁵ Joerg Wolf, 'Clinton expresses strong support for NATO and Europe', Atlantic-Community.org, 24 March 2016, <http://www.atlantic-community.org/-/clinton-expresses-strong-support-for-nato-and-europe>.

⁸⁶ Chas Danner, 'Merkel says Trump-led US is no longer a reliable ally', *New York Magazine*, 28 May 2017, <http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2017/05/merkel-says-trump-led-us-is-no-longer-a-reliable-ally.html>.

⁸⁷ Response of James Mattis to 'Advance policy questions for James N. Mattis nominee to be Secretary of Defense', 12 Jan. 2017, https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/hearings/17-01-12-confirmation-hearing_-mattis.

⁸⁸ Kathryn Watson, 'Sec. Mattis on Russia: "NATO is not a threat and they know it"', CBS News, 27 May

Primacy, or: where are the carriers?⁸⁹

It is a longstanding truism that nuclear aircraft carriers are the global equivalent of the queen on a chessboard. Their range and capacity provide US presidents with the ability to use military force to 'reach out and touch' a variety of targets at virtually any time. The ongoing North Korean crisis provides a powerful illustration of their use, together with other instruments of American military power, in an emerging American strategy of primacy in north-east Asia.

For several decades, the United States has unsuccessfully used diplomatic, economic and political instruments in efforts to prevent the DPRK from acquiring nuclear weapons and long-range delivery systems.⁹⁰ The Trump administration's marked change in strategy has been prompted by an increasingly bellicose DPRK leadership with a growing missile capability. Although Trump has discussed the issue with allies, the UN and even the Chinese,⁹¹ his administration's primary strategic response has consisted of blunt military threats and unilateral operations.

Trump's position on the DPRK's nuclear programme prior to his becoming president was inconsistent. He first favoured a pre-emptive strike against the Pyongyang regime. On the campaign trail, however, he mused that China should address the problem and/or Japan should develop its own nuclear weapons.⁹² But since his inauguration, American strategy has been consistent. Responding to repeated North Korean missile tests, Trump said: 'We are sending an armada ... very powerful ... we have submarines, very powerful, far more powerful than an aircraft carrier, that I can tell you.'⁹³ Furthermore, as he reiterated in June, 'the era of strategic patience' with North Korea 'is over'.⁹⁴ And his National Security Advisor H. R. McMaster stated bluntly that 'all our options are on the table'.⁹⁵

Some accounts of this crisis suggest there is evidence of American cooperation with regional allies.⁹⁶ This misreads the administration's behaviour. Officials have

2017, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/what-do-the-russians-want-beats-me-defense-secretary-mattis-says/>; Defense Intelligence Agency, *Russia, military power* (Washington DC, 2017), <http://www.dia.mil/Portals/27/Documents/News/Military%20Power%20Publications/Russia%20Military%20Power%20Report%202017.pdf?ver=2017-06-28-144235-937>; Mythili Sampathkumar, 'Senate votes for new Russia sanctions while limiting Trump's ability to lift them', *Independent*, 15 June 2017, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/russia-sanctions-us-senate-vote-trump-power-lift-a7792501.html>.

⁸⁹ 'When word of a crisis breaks out in Washington, it's no accident that the first question that comes to everyone's lips is: "Where's the nearest carrier?"', President Bill Clinton, 12 March 1993, aboard USS *Theodore Roosevelt*, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/where.htm>.

⁹⁰ Farago, 'Washington's failure to resolve the North Korean nuclear conundrum'.

⁹¹ Colum Lynch and Dan De Luce, 'Trump raised prospect of a North Korea strike with UN envoys, but said he wants to avoid a fight', *Foreign Policy Online*, 27 April 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/04/27/trump-raised-prospect-of-a-north-korea-strike-with-u-n-envoys-but-said-he-wants-to-avoid-a-fight/>.

⁹² Council on Foreign Relations, 'Trump on the issues: North Korea', *CFR.org* (n.d.), <https://www.cfr.org/campaign2016/donald-trump/on-north-korea>.

⁹³ 'Trump: "Armada" heading toward North Korea', CNN, 4 April 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/videos/world/2017/04/12/trump-armada-north-korea-fox-news-sje-orig.cnn>.

⁹⁴ Mark Landler, 'Trump takes more aggressive stance with US friends and foes in Asia', *New York Times*, 30 June 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/30/world/asia/trump-south-korea-china.html?smprod=nytcore-ipad&smid=nytcore-ipad-share&_r=0.

⁹⁵ 'US National Security Adviser H. R. McMaster: all options on the table for North Korea', *War Defense and News*, 16 April 2017, http://wardefencenews.blogspot.com/2017/04/us-national-security-adviser-h-r_16.html.

⁹⁶ Doina Chiacu and Jason Lange, 'Trump reaches out to Asia allies over North Korea's nuclear threat', *Time*, 30 April 2017, <http://time.com/4760958/donald-trump-north-korea-thailand-singapore/>.

indeed consulted with regional allies—South Korea and Japan—and have spoken with Chinese officials. But they did not ask what strategy they should pursue, nor did they request military support for American operations. Rather, they requested political and diplomatic support for another round of sanctions (which the UN introduced in June and then August), assistance in intelligence-gathering, and support in communicating the administration's intent to both the DPRK and stakeholders—while stating clearly and repeatedly that the United States is prepared to act unilaterally. Indeed, when finally meeting South Korea's new President Moon Jae-in in late June, Trump emphasized this point and 'showed little patience for Mr. Moon's hope for engagement with the North', despite Chinese concerns.⁹⁷

As Tom Ricks notes, the United States has long prepared for such a crisis, in the event that the DPRK became able to mount a legitimate threat to American territory.⁹⁸ A heightened missile threat has, predictably, ensured the adoption of a primacist strategy. The United States is less concerned with North Korea's impact on regional security and stability than with the possibility that it will develop long-range missiles capable of reaching American territory. This threat became more tangible with the DPRK's launch of a new missile on 4 July 2017—probably a version of the KN-17 liquid-fuelled missile, with an additional second stage intended to give it a range up to 5,500 kilometres (3,400 miles).⁹⁹ In response, America's UN Ambassador Nikki Haley warned that 'the US is prepared to use the full range of our capabilities to defend ourselves and our allies', and continued: 'One of our capabilities lies with our considerable military forces. We will use them if we must, but we prefer not to have to go in that direction.'¹⁰⁰

The military dimensions of a primacist strategy are problematic. The operational complexity of striking North Korea's nuclear facilities is very high, and would not be substantially reduced through military cooperation with regional allies (apart from South Korea)¹⁰¹ or even the Chinese People's Liberation Army. Only the American military has the experience and resources required to attack the DPRK's nuclear and integrated air defence systems by conducting precision strikes using a combination of air- and sea-launched missiles, penetrating bombers with fighter escorts, and employing intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance assets. The prospects for success, however, are limited; experts have expressed

⁹⁷ Landler, 'Trump takes more aggressive stance'.

⁹⁸ Thomas E. Ricks, 'Why "5027" is a number you should know: how war in Korea might unfold', *Foreign Policy*, 1 May 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/05/01/why-5027-is-a-number-you-should-know-how-war-in-korea-might-unfold/>.

⁹⁹ Barbara Starr and Jeremy Herb, 'US: North Korea launched new kind of missile', CNN, 5 July 2017, <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/07/05/politics/us-north-korea-launched-new-missile/index.html>.

¹⁰⁰ Jeremy Herb and Sonia Moghe, 'Haley: North Korea launch a "clear and sharp military escalation"', CNN, 5 July 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2017/07/05/politics/nikki-haley-north-korea-military-escalation-un/index.html>.

¹⁰¹ On 5 July, one day after North Korea's launch of an ICBM, the US and South Korea demonstrated their own resolve with a 'snap' military exercise in which the US Army used its army tactical missile system and South Korea its Hyunmoo Missile II to demonstrate a 'deep strike precision capability', presumably able to strike high-value targets inside North Korea. See Dan Lamothe, 'U.S. Army and South Korean military respond to North Korea's launch with missile exercise', *Washington Post*, 4 July 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2017/07/04/u-s-army-and-south-korean-military-respond-to-north-korea-launch-with-missile-exercise/?utm_term=.b1a13f55d88f.

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fears that North Korea's nuclear and missile capabilities would remain potent and that it would retaliate against South Korea and the 28,500 American troops stationed there.¹⁰² Thus, the burden of defending against North Korean attacks would fall on the armed forces of South Korea—whose leadership and public alike have been troubled by the Trump administration's handling of the situation, preferring what Moon Jae-in has characterized as a 'sunshine' policy of engagement with the North.¹⁰³

Moon Jae-in met with Trump during Moon's first overseas visit. But, reflecting America's primacist approach, John Delury has been quoted as suggesting that: 'All this North Korea stuff has been debated and South Korea hasn't really been part of the conversation as far as Donald Trump is concerned.'¹⁰⁴ Even the hastened deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile defence system, which theoretically could provide South Korea with some modest defence against the DPRK's large number of intermediate missiles, generated controversy. News reports suggested that South Koreans believe THAAD's deployment means the Trump administration is preparing for a pre-emptive attack.¹⁰⁵ Moreover, in an incident highlighting the tensions between crisis management and the administration's unilateralism, many South Koreans were offended by Trump's suggestion that South Korea should pay US\$1 billion for its deployment. Amid protests in April, McMaster reaffirmed the US would abide by the terms of an earlier agreement on THAAD and pay for the system.¹⁰⁶ The newly elected South Korean government's response two months later was to block the deployment of additional launchers, on the pretext of environmental concerns.¹⁰⁷ Nonetheless, the US maintains control over any decision regarding the use of the two deployed systems.

The US therefore confronts a state actor in North Korea. It is armed with a large, if poorly resourced, conventional military and a growing array of missiles capable, if engineering and operational challenges have indeed been resolved, of carrying nuclear warheads and reaching key US allies such as Japan and, potentially, American territory. A unilateral pre-emptive strike involving American forces, of dubious legality under international law unless an attack were deemed imminent,¹⁰⁸ would still be tempting for the Trump administration (or other

¹⁰² Max Fisher, 'The risks of pre-emptive strikes against North Korea', *New York Times*, 18 March 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/18/world/asia/us-north-korea-weapons.html?_r=0.

¹⁰³ For a summary of Moon Jae-in's position and its implications, see Weston Phippen, 'Moon Jae In wins South Korea's presidential election', *The Atlantic*, 9 May 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/news/archive/2017/05/south-korea-presidential-election/525942/>.

¹⁰⁴ Joshua Berlinger, 'North Korea casts shadow as Trump and Moon meet for the first time', CNN, 29 June 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2017/06/28/asia/south-korea-moon-jae-in-donald-trump-meeting/index.html>.

¹⁰⁵ Kim Tong Hyung, 'Anger grows in South Korea over US anti-missile system', AP, 2 May 2017, <http://elections.ap.org/content/anger-grows-south-korea-over-us-anti-missile-system>.

¹⁰⁶ Associated Press, 'The latest: US won't seek South Korean money for THAAD', ABC News, 30 April 2017, <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2017/04/30/latest-us-wont-seek-south-korean-money-for-thaad.html>.

¹⁰⁷ Anna Fifield, 'South Korea suspends deployment of American missile defense system', *Washington Post*, 7 June 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/south-korea-suspends-deployment-of-american-missile-defense-system/2017/06/07/6215f314-4b60-11e7-b69d-c158df3149e9_story.html?utm_term=.a2a1a637012d.

¹⁰⁸ Bruce Klingner, *Save preemption for imminent North Korean attack*, Heritage Foundation Report, 1 March 2017, <http://www.heritage.org/missile-defense/report/save-preemption-imminent-north-korean-attack>.

American administrations for that matter) given the severity of the threat and the limited contributions expected from other parties. Indeed, both the President and Secretary of State Tillerson have indicated that, in Tillerson's words: 'If they elevate the threat of their weapons program to a level that we believe requires action then that [military] option is on the table.'¹⁰⁹

The use of a primacist strategy is not unprecedented, and the likelihood grows with the threat. As William Perry (Bill Clinton's former Secretary of Defense) noted, the United States has in the past come quite close to launching pre-emptive strikes against North Korea, most notably in 1994 when the regime was moving nuclear fuel rods from its reactor at Yongbyon to a reprocessing centre—'the first step in making a nuclear weapon'.¹¹⁰ Without rejecting the possibility of a negotiated solution, neither Perry nor Ashton Carter, one of his successors under Obama, has been willing to disavow the possibility of unilateral, pre-emptive action in the face of a growing threat.¹¹¹ Neither has Trump. And the American strategic position appears bipartisan among the security community.

Still, significantly, Trump's critics on the political right have used the language of candidate Trump and his senior national security advisers against him. Patrick Buchanan, a former Republican presidential candidate, argues that Trump should pursue a true 'America First' policy:

We should also tell South Korea that if she desires a nuclear deterrent against an attack by the North, she should build it. Americans should not risk a nuclear war, 8,000 miles away, to defend a South Korea that has 40 times the economy of the North and twice the population ... No vital US interest requires us, in perpetuity, to be willing to go to war to defend South Korea, especially if that war entails the risk of a nuclear attack on US troops or the American homeland.¹¹²

Trump is therefore being criticized from the right for employing a strategy familiar to Presidents Clinton, Bush and Obama, rather than for the rhetoric he deployed as a citizen and a campaigner.

Conclusion

This article has addressed two broad questions. The first concerns whether any US president can have a grand strategy; the second, the question of continuity and change in operational strategy. We have used Trump's first six months in office to reflect on both. As the most forthright president in modern history, he could

¹⁰⁹ Alexander Smith, 'Rex Tillerson: military action against North Korea is "on the Table"', NBC News, 17 March 2017, <http://www.nbcnews.com/news/north-korea/rex-tillerson-military-action-against-north-korea-table-n734771>.

¹¹⁰ Barbara Demick, 'Q&A: former Defense Secretary William Perry on why we didn't go to war with North Korea', *Los Angeles Times*, 14 April 2017, <http://www.latimes.com/nation/la-fg-perry-north-korea-20170414-story.html>.

¹¹¹ See, for example, during an earlier, less critical phase of the longstanding crisis, Ashton B. Carter and William J. Perry, 'If necessary, strike and destroy: North Korea cannot be allowed to test this missile', *Washington Post*, 22 June 2006, p. A29.

¹¹² Patrick J. Buchanan, 'An America First Korea policy', CNS News, 30 June 2017, <http://www.cnsnews.com/commentary/patrick-j-buchanan/america-first-korea-policy>.

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be expected to have a consolidated grand strategy that would consistently distinguish itself from his predecessors, in ‘ways, means and ends’—most pointedly, operationally.

Our article suggests otherwise. In response to the first question, Trump has not universally attempted to apply an isolationist, ‘America first’, grand strategy through a process of disengagement. Nor, conversely, has he taken universal steps to restore American primacy globally. Bluster, a few missile strikes against Syria, and demands for alliance burden-sharing attract enormous publicity and may be popular with his electoral base. But the critics are correct: they do not reflect any single strategy. Meanwhile, administration officials have repeatedly retreated from the one-dimensional campaign rhetoric.

This variance does not lead us to conclude that no underlying logic exists. The evidence suggests that the Trump administration, like its two predecessors, is employing calibrated strategies. In a period of flux, it is clearly premature to make definitive judgements about which strategies it will pursue and where; and we readily concede that our interpretations are contestable at this point. Nonetheless, several trends are evident. First, despite Trump’s abrasive rhetoric, there has been to date less of a sharp break with traditional operational strategies than was widely anticipated. Many of the new administration’s strategies are comparable to those of its predecessors.

The Trump administration has pursued a classically isolationist strategy along the Mexican border. It is hard to overlook the symbolic significance of the proposed construction of a wall. But wall construction began under Bush; and, however painful it may be to the ears of Obama supporters, the Trump approach is a logical extension of the enhanced border security policies employed by Bush and Obama since 9/11. The same is true of Trump’s migrant deportation policy (although *not* the travel ban, which clearly departs from prior policy but is yet to be adjudicated). This isolationist strategy is consistent with one combating non-state actors in response to illicit flows.

Meanwhile, primacy has recurred in the case of North Korea. It is unclear whether this strategy will address America’s ‘vital national interests’.¹¹³ But it is consistent with what we would expect in the face of the emergence of an existential threat. Most controversially, we suggest that the Trump administration has aggressively pursued a leadership strategy in NATO. It has not reneged on America’s agreement with its allies (as it has in respect of the Paris climate change agreement). It has demanded greater financial equity, but has operationally reinforced America’s relationship with NATO. This is consistent with our claims concerning situations where collective action problems require coordinated strategies in opposition to a combination of state and non-state actors employing hybrid forms of conflict.

This review does not, and cannot, represent the entire sweep of Trump’s eventual strategies. Our analysis of the Bush and Obama administrations suggests

¹¹³ Mark Landler and Eric Schmitt, ‘Aircraft carrier wasn’t sailing to deter North Korea, as US suggested’, *New York Times*, 18 April 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/18/world/asia/aircraft-carrier-north-korea-carl-vinson.html?_r=0.

that, over time, he will employ other strategies—notably, those of sponsorship and restraint—in situations where the configuration of bureaucratic politics and threats, adversaries, and the nature of conflict are appropriately aligned.¹¹⁴ So, for example, non- and counter-proliferation policies (such as the Proliferation Security Initiative, designed to combat the smuggling of biological, nuclear and chemical weapons) will remain among the foundational elements of American security policy. Both Bush and Obama chose sponsorship—a strategy designed to bolster and subsidize allies who share America’s interests and are motivated to implement them—to address this threat.¹¹⁵

The portents of American policy in Libya or Syria remain unclear, although the administration’s unprecedented unilateral bombing of a Syrian convoy approaching a US base was a milestone.¹¹⁶ Obama’s strategy of sponsorship in both countries—infamously characterized as ‘leading from behind’—will be tested by Trump’s temptation towards greater direct involvement and new cooperative US–Russian initiatives in Syria. Elsewhere in the Middle East, although few details regarding America’s role have yet emerged, the Gulf Cooperation Council’s diplomatic and economic isolation of Qatar in the aftermath of Trump’s visit to Saudi Arabia superficially looks more like the implementation of a multilateral leadership strategy—with subsequent calls for ‘reasonable’ diplomatic negotiations by American officials.¹¹⁷

A restraint strategy entails limited engagement beyond retaining control of the world’s sea lanes and airwaves. It accords well with the preferences of the administration’s fiscally conservative, budget-cutting faction. Advocates of a more aggressive military policy in the Arctic, for example, are therefore likely to be disappointed. As one State Department official observed:

U.S. interests in the Arctic are profound and enduring, and they’re based largely but not entirely on Alaska—on the people of Alaska, on the economy and environment of Alaska, on Alaska policy-makers. And those factors aren’t changing. Beyond that, we have long sought to keep the Arctic stable and peaceful, as it has been. I don’t see that changing as well.¹¹⁸

Trump may therefore have sounded naive, but was correct when he stated that ‘It’s complicated.’ Scholars and analysts who expect, and advocate, the adoption of any single grand strategy to address contemporary US security needs are certain to be disappointed. Like his predecessors, and probably his successors, Trump will of necessity pursue multiple strategic approaches. These will be dependent, in large part, on context—the actors, threat and character of any conflict. This trend

¹¹⁴ Reich and Dombrowski, *The end of grand strategy*.

¹¹⁵ Peter Dombrowski and Simon Reich, ‘The strategy of sponsorship’, *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* 57: 5, Oct. 2015, pp. 121–48.

¹¹⁶ Paul McLeary, ‘US bombs Syrian forces regime for first time’, *Foreign Policy*, 18 May 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/05/18/u-s-bombs-syrian-regime-forces-for-first-time/>.

¹¹⁷ Elise Labott and Tamara Qiblawi, ‘Tillerson urges Qatar and boycotting Arab countries to resolve crisis’, CNN, 25 June 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2017/06/25/politics/tillerson-qatar-crisis/index.html>.

¹¹⁸ Yereth Rosen, ‘US Arctic officials don’t expect big policy changes with Trump presidency’, *Alaska Dispatch News*, 26 Jan. 2017, <https://www.adn.com/arctic/2017/01/26/u-s-arctic-officials-dont-expect-big-policy-changes-with-trump-presidency/>.

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will be reinforced by bureaucratic and organizational imperatives. This is not to suggest that we will not observe more changes. We have already done so, as the context has changed in North Korea. But, in contrast to the 'either/or' propositions offered by well-informed scholars and analysts when analysing the Trump administration,¹¹⁹ there will also be surprising continuities, and a need to deploy coexisting strategies that are flexible and adaptive.

¹¹⁹ Hal Brands, 'Is American internationalism dead? Reading the national mood in the age of Trump', *War on the Rocks*, 16 May 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/05/is-american-internationalism-dead-reading-the-national-mood-in-the-age-of-trump/>.