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Trump's Surprising Grand Strategy

Barry R. Posen

On the campaign trail, Donald Trump vowed to put an end to nation building abroad and mocked U.S. allies as free riders. “America first’ will be the major and overriding theme of my administration,” he declared in a foreign policy speech in April 2016, echoing the language of pre-World War II isolationists. “The countries we are defending must pay for the cost of this defense, and if not, the U.S. must be prepared to let these countries defend themselves,” he said—an apparent reference to his earlier suggestion that U.S. allies without nuclear weapons be allowed to acquire them.

Such statements, coupled with his mistrust of free trade and the treaties and institutions that facilitate it, prompted worries from across the political spectrum that under Trump, the United States would turn inward and abandon the leadership role it has played since the end of World War II. “The US is, for now, out of the world order business,” the columnist Robert Kagan wrote days after the election. Since Trump took office, his critics have appeared to feel vindicated. They have seized on his continued

complaints about allies and skepticism of unfettered trade to claim that the administration has effectively withdrawn from the world and even adopted a grand strategy of restraint. Some have gone so far as to apply to Trump the most feared epithet in the U.S. foreign policy establishment: “isolationist.”

In fact, Trump is anything but. Although he has indeed laced his speeches with skepticism about Washington’s global role, worries that Trump is an isolationist are out of place against the backdrop of the administration’s accelerating drumbeat for war with North Korea, its growing confrontation with Iran, and its uptick in combat operations worldwide. Indeed, across the portfolio of hard power, the Trump administration’s policies seem, if anything, more ambitious than those of Barack Obama.

Yet Trump has deviated from traditional U.S. grand strategy in one important respect. Since at least the end of the Cold War, Democratic and Republican administrations alike have pursued a grand strategy that scholars have called “liberal hegemony.” It was hegemonic in that the United States aimed to be the most powerful state in the world by a wide margin, and it was liberal in that the United States sought to transform the international system into a rules-based order regulated by multilateral institutions and transform other states into market-oriented democracies freely trading with one another. Breaking with his predecessors, Trump has taken much of the “liberal” out of “liberal hegemony.” He still seeks to retain the United States’ superior economic and military capability and role as security arbiter for most regions of the world, but he has chosen to forgo the export of democracy and

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No retreat: U.S. marines in Afghanistan, July 2017

abstain from many multilateral trade agreements. In other words, Trump has ushered in an entirely new U.S. grand strategy: illiberal hegemony.

NO DOVE

Grand strategy is a slippery concept, and for those attempting to divine the Trump administration's, its National Security Strategy—a word salad of a document—yields little insight. The better way to understand Trump's approach to the world is to look at a year's worth of actual policies. For all the talk of avoiding foreign adventurism and entanglements, in practice, his administration has remained committed to geopolitical competition with the world's greatest military powers and to the formal and informal alliances it inherited. It has threatened new wars to hinder the emergence of new nuclear weapons states, as did its predecessors; it has

pursued ongoing wars against the Taliban in Afghanistan and the Islamic State (or ISIS) in Iraq and Syria with more resources and more violence than its predecessors. It has also announced plans to invest even more money in the Department of Defense, the budget of which still outstrips that of all of the United States' competitors' militaries combined.

When it comes to alliances, it may at first glance seem as if Trump has deviated from tradition. As a candidate, he regularly complained about the failure of U.S. allies, especially those in NATO, to share the burden of collective defense. However uninformed these objections were, they were entirely fair; for two decades, the defense contributions of the European states in NATO have fallen short of the alliance's own guidelines. Alliance partisans on both sides of the Atlantic find complaints about burden sharing irksome not only because they

ring true but also because they secretly find them unimportant. The actual production of combat power pales in comparison to the political goal of gluing the United States to Europe, no matter what. Thus the handwringing when Trump attended the May 2017 NATO summit and pointedly failed to mention Article 5, the treaty's mutual-defense provision, an omission that suggested that the United States might not remain the final arbiter of all strategic disputes across Europe.

But Trump backtracked within weeks, and all the while, the United States has continued to go about its ally-reassurance business as if nothing has changed. Few Americans have heard of the European Reassurance Initiative. One would be forgiven for thinking that the nearly 100,000 U.S. troops that remained deployed in Europe after the end of the Cold War would have provided enough reassurance, but after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014, the allies clamored for still more reassurance, and so was born this new initiative. The ERI is funded not in the regular U.S. defense budget but in the Overseas Contingency Operations appropriation—the “spend whatever it takes without much oversight” fund originally approved by Congress for the global war on terrorism. The ERI has paid for increased U.S. military exercises in eastern Europe, improved military infrastructure across that region, outright gifts of equipment to Ukraine, and new stockpiles of U.S. equipment in Europe adequate to equip a U.S. armored division in case of emergency. At the end of 2017, Washington announced that for the first time, it would sell particularly lethal antitank guided missiles to Ukraine. So far, the U.S. government has spent or

planned to spend \$10 billion on the ERI, and in its budget for the 2018 fiscal year, the Trump administration increased the funding by nearly \$1.5 billion. Meanwhile, all the planned new exercises and deployments in eastern Europe are proceeding apace. The U.S. military commitment to NATO remains strong, and the allies are adding just enough new money to their own defense plans to placate the president. In other words, it's business as usual.

In Asia, the United States appears, if anything, to be more militarily active than it was during the Obama administration, which announced a “pivot” to the region. Trump's main preoccupation is with the maturation of North Korea's nuclear weapons program—a focus at odds with his campaign musings about independent nuclear forces for Japan and South Korea. In an effort to freeze and ultimately reverse North Korea's program, he has threatened the use of military force, saying last September, for example, “The United States has great strength and patience, but if it is forced to defend itself or its allies, we will have no choice but to totally destroy North Korea.” Although it is difficult to tell if Pyongyang takes such threats seriously, Washington's foreign policy elite certainly does, and many fear that war by accident or design is now much more likely. The Pentagon has backed up these threats with more frequent military maneuvers, including sending long-range strategic bombers on sorties over the Korean Peninsula. At the same time, the administration has tried to put economic pressure on North Korea, attempting to convince China to cut off the flow of critical materials to the country, especially oil.

Across the Pacific, the U.S. Navy continues to sustain a frenetic pace of

operations—about 160 bilateral and multilateral exercises per year. In July, the United States conducted the annual Malabar exercise with India and Japan, bringing together aircraft carriers from all three countries for the first time. In November, it assembled an unusual flotilla of three aircraft carriers off the Korean Peninsula during Trump's visit to Asia. Beginning in May 2017, the navy increased the frequency of its freedom-of-navigation operations, or FONOPs, in which its ships patrol parts of the South China Sea claimed by China. So busy is the U.S. Navy, in fact, that in 2017 alone, its Seventh Fleet, based in Japan, experienced an unprecedented four ship collisions, one grounding, and one airplane crash.

During his trip to Asia in November, Trump dutifully renewed U.S. security commitments, and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe of Japan seems to have decided to allow no daylight between him and the president, including on North Korea. Given Trump's litany of complaints about the unfairness of U.S. trade relationships in Asia and his effective ceding of the economic ground rules to China, one might be surprised that U.S. allies in the region are hugging this president so closely. But free security provided by a military superpower is a difficult thing to replace, and managing relations with one that sees the world in more zero-sum economic terms than usual is a small price to pay.

The Trump administration has increased its military activities across the Middle East, too, in ways that should please the critics who lambasted Obama for his arm's-length approach to the region. Trump wasted no time demonstrating his intent to reverse the mistakes of the

past. In April 2017, in response to evidence that the Syrian government had used chemical weapons, the U.S. Navy launched 59 cruise missiles at the air base where the attack originated. Ironically, Trump was punishing Syria for violating a redline that Obama had drawn and a chemical weapons disarmament agreement that Obama had struck with Syria, both of which Trump pilloried his predecessor for having done. Nevertheless, the point was made: there's a new sheriff in town.

The Trump administration has also accelerated the war against ISIS. This Pentagon does not like to share information about its activities, but according to its own figures, it appears that the United States sent more troops into Iraq and Syria, and dropped more bombs on those countries, in 2017 than in 2016. In Afghanistan, Trump, despite having mused about the mistakes of nation building during the campaign, has indulged the inexplicable compulsion of U.S. military leaders ("my generals," in his words) to not only remain in the country but also escalate the war. Thousands of additional U.S. troops have been sent to the country, and U.S. air strikes there have increased to a level not seen since 2012.

Finally, the administration has signaled that it plans to confront Iran more aggressively across the Middle East. Trump himself opposed the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran, and his advisers appear eager to push back against the country, as well. In December, for example, Nikki Haley, the U.S. ambassador to the UN, stood in front of debris from what she claimed was an Iranian missile and alleged that Tehran was arming rebels in Yemen, where Iran and Saudi Arabia are engaged in a proxy war. Behind the

scenes, the Trump administration seems to have been at least as supportive of the Saudi intervention in Yemen as was its predecessor. The Obama administration lent its support to the Saudis in order to buy their cooperation on the Iran deal, and given that Trump despises that agreement, his backing of the Saudis can be understood only as an anti-Iran effort. Barring a war with North Korea—and the vortex of policy attention and military resources that conflict would create—it seems likely that more confrontation with Iran is in the United States' future.

The Trump administration's defense budget also suggests a continued commitment to the idea of the United States as the world's policeman. Trump ran for office on the proposition that, as he put it on Twitter, "I will make our Military so big, powerful & strong that no one will mess with us." Once in office, he rolled out a defense budget that comes in at roughly 20 percent more than the 2017 one; about half the increase was requested by the administration, and the other half was added by Congress. (The fate of this budget is unclear: under the Budget Control Act, these increases require the support of the Democrats, which the Republicans will need to buy with increased spending on domestic programs.) To take but one small example of its appetite for new spending, the administration has ramped up the acquisition of precision-guided munitions by more than 40 percent from 2016, a move that is consistent with the president's oft-stated intention to wage current military campaigns more intensively (as well as with an expectation of imminent future wars).

Trump also remains committed to the trillion-dollar nuclear modernization

program begun by the Obama administration. This program renews every leg of the nuclear triad—missiles, bombers, and submarines. It is based on the Cold War—era assumption that in order to credibly deter attacks against allies, U.S. nuclear forces must have the ability to limit the damage of a full-scale nuclear attack, meaning the United States needs to be able to shoot first and destroy an adversary's entire nuclear arsenal before its missiles launch. Although efforts at damage limitation are seductive, against peer nuclear powers, they are futile, since only a few of an enemy's nuclear weapons need to survive in order to do egregious damage to the United States in retaliation. In the best case, the modernization program is merely a waste of money, since all it does is compel U.S. competitors to modernize their own forces to ensure their ability to retaliate; in the worst case, it causes adversaries to develop itchy trigger fingers themselves, raising the risk that a crisis will escalate to nuclear war. If Trump were truly committed to America first, he would think a bit harder about the costs and risks of this strategy.

PRIMACY WITHOUT A PURPOSE

Hegemony is always difficult to achieve, because most states jealously guard their sovereignty and resist being told what to do. But since the end of the Cold War, the U.S. foreign policy elite has reached the consensus that liberal hegemony is different. This type of dominance, they argue, is, with the right combination of hard and soft power, both achievable and sustainable. International security and economic institutions, free trade, human rights, and the spread of democracy are not only values in their own right, the logic goes; they also serve to lure others to

the cause. If realized, these goals would do more than legitimate the project of a U.S.-led liberal world order; they would produce a world so consonant with U.S. values and interests that the United States would not even need to work that hard to ensure its security.

Trump has abandoned this well-worn path. He has denigrated international economic institutions, such as the World Trade Organization, which make nice scapegoats for the disruptive economic changes that have energized his political base. He has abandoned the Paris climate agreement, partly because he says it disadvantages the United States economically. Not confident that Washington can sufficiently dominate international institutions to ensure its interests, the president has withdrawn from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, launched a combative renegotiation of the North American Free Trade Agreement, and let the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership wither on the vine. In lieu of such agreements, Trump has declared a preference for bilateral trade arrangements, which he contends are easier to audit and enforce.

Pointing out that recent U.S. efforts to build democracy abroad have been costly and unsuccessful, Trump has also jettisoned democracy promotion as a foreign policy goal, aside from some stray tweets in support of anti-regime protesters in Iran. So far as one can tell, he cares not one whit about the liberal transformation of other societies. In Afghanistan, for example, his strategy counts not on perfecting the Afghan government but on bludgeoning the Taliban into negotiating (leaving vague what exactly the Taliban would negotiate). More generally, Trump has often praised

foreign dictators, from Vladimir Putin of Russia to Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines. His plans for more restrictive immigration and refugee policies, motivated in part by fears about terrorism, have skated uncomfortably close to outright bigotry. His grand strategy is primacy without a purpose.

Such lack of concern for the kinder, gentler part of the American hegemonic project infuriates its latter-day defenders. Commenting on the absence of liberal elements in Trump's National Security Strategy, Susan Rice, who was national security adviser in the Obama administration, wrote in December, "These omissions undercut global perceptions of American leadership; worse, they hinder our ability to rally the world to our cause when we blithely dismiss the aspirations of others."

But whether that view is correct or not should be a matter of debate, not a matter of faith. States have long sought to legitimate their foreign policies, because even grudging cooperation from others is less costly than mild resistance. But in the case of the United States, the liberal gloss does not appear to have made hegemony all that easy to achieve or sustain. For nearly 30 years, the United States tested the hypothesis that the liberal character of its hegemonic project made it uniquely achievable. The results suggest that the experiment failed.

Neither China nor Russia has become a democracy, nor do they show any sign of moving in that direction. Both are building the military power necessary to compete with the United States, and both have neglected to sign up for the U.S.-led liberal world order. At great cost, Washington has failed to build stable democratic governments in Afghanistan

and Iraq. Within NATO, a supposed guardian of democracy, Hungary, Poland, and Turkey are turning increasingly authoritarian. The European Union, the principal liberal institutional progeny of the U.S. victory in the Cold War, has suffered the loss of the United Kingdom, and other member states flaunt its rules, as Poland has done regarding its standards on the independence of the judiciary. A new wave of identity politics—nationalist, sectarian, racist, or otherwise—has swept not only the developing world but also the developed world, including the United States. Internationally and domestically, liberal hegemony has failed to deliver.

WHAT RESTRAINT LOOKS LIKE

None of this should be taken as an endorsement of Trump's national security policy. The administration is overcommitted militarily; it is cavalier about the threat of force; it has no strategic priorities whatsoever; it has no actual plan to ensure more equitable burden sharing among U.S. allies; under the guise of counterterrorism, it intends to remain deeply involved militarily in the internal affairs of other countries; and it is dropping too many bombs, in too many places, on too many people. These errors will likely produce the same pattern of poor results at home and abroad that the United States has experienced since the end of the Cold War.

If Trump really wanted to follow through on some of his campaign musings, he would pursue a much more focused engagement with the world's security problems. A grand strategy of restraint, as I and other scholars have called this approach, starts from the premise that the United States is a very secure country and asks what few things could jeopardize that

security. It then recommends narrow policies to address those potential threats.

In practice, restraint would mean pursuing a cautious balance-of-power strategy in Asia to ensure that China does not find a way to dominate the region—retaining command of the sea to keep China from coercing its neighbors or preventing Washington from reinforcing them, while acknowledging China's fears and, instead of surrounding it with U.S. forces, getting U.S. allies to do more for their own defense. It would mean sharing best practices with other nuclear powers across the globe to prevent their nuclear weapons from falling into the hands of nonstate actors. And it would mean cooperating with other countries, especially in the intelligence realm, to limit the ability of nihilistic terrorists to carry out spectacular acts of destruction. The United States still faces all these threats, only with the added complication of doing so in a world in which its relative power position has slipped. Thus, it is essential that U.S. allies, especially rich ones such as those in Europe, share more of the burden, so that the United States can focus its own power on the main threats. For example, the Europeans should build most of the military power to deter Russia, so that the United States can better concentrate its resources to sustain command of the global commons—the sea, the air, and space.

Those who subscribe to restraint also believe that military power is expensive to maintain, more expensive to use, and generally delivers only crude results; thus, it should be used sparingly. They tend to favor free trade but reject the notion that U.S. trade would suffer mightily if the U.S. military were less active. They take seriously the problem of identity

politics, especially nationalism, and therefore do not expect other peoples to welcome U.S. efforts to transform their societies, especially at gunpoint. Thus, other than those activities that aim to preserve the United States' command of the sea, restraint's advocates find little merit in Trump's foreign policy; it is decidedly unrestrained.

During the campaign, Trump tore into the United States' post-Cold War grand strategy. "As time went on, our foreign policy began to make less and less sense," he said. "Logic was replaced with foolishness and arrogance, which led to one foreign policy disaster after another." Many thought such criticisms might herald a new period of retrenchment. Although the Trump administration has pared or abandoned many of the pillars of liberal internationalism, its security policy has remained consistently hegemonic. Whether illiberal hegemony will prove any more or any less sustainable than its liberal cousin remains an open question. The foreign policy establishment continues to avoid the main question: Is U.S. hegemony of any kind sustainable, and if not, what policy should replace it? Trump turns out to be as good at avoiding that question as those he has condemned. 🌐