

CONTEXTUALIZING THE "TRUMP DOCTRINE"

REALISM, TRANSACTIONALISM AND THE CIVILIZATIONAL AGENDA

Ville Sinkkonen

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This FIIA analysis situates President Donald J. Trump's foreign policy in the discursive field of post-Cold War American foreign-policy debates, and assesses the possible perils it poses for US global engagement.

The "Trump doctrine" has been built in contradistinction to liberal internationalism, contains civilizational tropes drawn from neoconservatism, and is underpinned by a zero-sum materialist worldview borrowed from realism. Trump's approach to the international is also transactional, which means he intermittently draws upon (neo) isolationist themes. This Trumpian amalgamation of four American foreign policy traditions can be termed transactionalist realism with civilizational undertones.

By embracing this approach to the international arena, Trump and his administration risk eschewing the importance of social relations that legitimize US international conduct, turning inter-cultural struggles into self-fulfilling prophecies, and undermining prudent long-term use of American power. If methodically carried out, the emerging "Trump doctrine" will prove detrimental for the future of US global leadership in a complex 21st-century world.



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INTRODUCTION

There is no shortage of analyses of Donald J. Trump's foreign policy. In fact, his ascent to the presidency has brought together a heterogeneous group of the impressed and disaffected, who can project their own aspirations and grievances upon his oftentimes conflicting statements and actions. For some, Trump is a foreign policy realist, for others a nationalist isolationist. For still others, he appears devoid of moral scruples, an incompetent leader unable to deal with the duties and responsibilities bestowed upon him by the office.

This FIIA analysis seeks to introduce a semblance of harmony into these deliberations over Trump's global forays. In particular, the objective is to first situate the emerging "Trump doctrine" in the discursive field of post-Cold War American foreign-policy debates, and then to discuss the potential perils associated with the core pillars of this approach for US global engagement.

The article places Trump – and his administration's foreign policy more generally – in the context of four traditions that offer differing prescriptions for America's role in the world: liberal internationalism, neoconservatism, realism and neoisolationism. The aim is to illustrate that although Trump may be a *sui generis* president, his emerging approach to the international arena is actually an amalgamation. In other words, by conducting and articulating foreign policy, Trump both positions himself against and marries together insights from these four schools of thought. The emergent "Trump doctrine" appears antithetical to the liberal internationalist tradition by shunning multilateral commitments and downplaying liberal values. The approach also contains civilizational and Manichean tropes in the vein of neoconservatives, and adopts a zero-sum worldview replete with a materialist definition of power from realists. In addition, Trump has espoused a transactionalist bent towards the international arena. This can, at times, masquerade as adherence to an isolationist policy programme. The emergent Trumpian approach to foreign policy can thus be boiled down to *transactional realism with civilizational undertones*.

The analysis then goes on to discuss three pertinent pitfalls inherent in the "Trump doctrine". First, by defining American power narrowly in terms of material capabilities, the administration eschews the importance of legitimacy and soft power tools as important components of America's global role. Second, in framing the underlying purposes behind exercising US power as a function of imagined civilizational affinities, Trump and his team risk alienating large sections of the world's population and turning inter-cultural struggles into self-fulfilling prophecies. Third, the transactionalist mindset accentuates ad-hoc short-termism over long-term strategic thinking, which further undercuts the potential for the prudent use of American power. In light of these shortcomings and oversights, the emerging "Trump doctrine" appears detrimental for the future of US global leadership in an increasingly complex 21st-century world.

DEBATES, THEORY AND (FOREIGN) POLICY

Donald Trump has made much of the fact that he is an outsider who does not further the agenda of the Washington establishment. Instead, he is the hope of forgotten America, on a mission to "drain the swamp" of Washington, D.C., "Make America Great Again" and put "America First". However, neither Donald Trump nor the entourage he has assembled in key administration positions, exist independently of social structures. In fact, "[e]very foreign policy maker is as much a member of the social cognitive structure that characterizes her society as any average citizen"¹ These constellations make up the historical background matter that functions as a wellspring for foreign-policy thought and decision-making. Even in the era of a disruptive "Twitter President", the debates on America's place in the world that proliferate in the policy establishment, academia, think tanks, and public sphere, structure the political reality that policymakers in key positions confront.

The insights of social constructivist students of International Relations (IR) are useful for deciphering

1 Hopf 2002, p. 37.

how theoretical debates shape and circumscribe the foreign-policy views and practices of states and their leaderships. Constructivists treat social structures and the agents embedded within them as “mutually constitutive yet ontologically distinct entities”.² This means that foreign policy change and continuity is a product of the interplay between actors and structures – political operators are hardly structural idiots unwittingly carrying out institutionalized roles, but they are still constrained by the social structures within which they are immersed.³ *Ideas* thus have structural properties, “they define the limits of what is cognitively possible and impossible for individuals”. However, ideas proliferate through “knowledge-based practices”, which can only be carried out by individual actors in social settings.⁴

Constructivists have illustrated how various ideational factors in social environments – norms, rules, institutions, cultures or identities, to name a few – condition how states and foreign-policy makers as their representatives set goals and select the requisite means to achieve them.⁵ In short, ideational factors should not be treated as mere external constraints upon desires or interests of actors.⁶ As Wallace and Hill have argued:

*Effective foreign policy rests upon a shared sense of national identity, of a nation state’s ‘place in the world’, its friends and enemies, its interests and aspirations. These underlying assumptions are embedded in national history and myth, changing slowly over time as political leaders re-interpret them and external and internal developments shape them. Debates about foreign policy take place within the constraints this conventional wisdom about national interests sets upon acceptable choices; the symbols and reference points they provide enabling ministers to relate current decisions to familiar ideas.*⁷

In this reading, state identities can be viewed as constitutive of foreign policy interests, which means that non-material ideational factors invariably impact how such interests are formed in the first place.⁸ Therefore, state interests are neither static and frozen

in time, nor pre-social and based solely upon rational calculation.⁹

Bearing in mind the co-constitutive relationship between agents and structures along with the ideational grounding of interests, the constructivist turn in IR also points to the role language and practices play in the construction of social reality.¹⁰ This leads to the appreciation that *discourses* can exercise *productive power* upon actors. In other words, “the social processes and the systems of knowledge through which meaning is produced, fixed, lived, experienced, and transformed” define the boundaries of the possible and preset the parameters of the imaginable.¹¹ The power of language:

*[M]akes us understand certain problems in certain ways, and pose questions accordingly. It thereby limits the range of alternative policy options, and enables us to take on others.*¹²

In this vein, the theoretical debates over America’s place in the world provide competing discourses upon which foreign policy actors can ground their own arguments. Yet, by articulating such arguments, these actors actually come to *reproduce* the said discourses. This process can unfold even without explicit acknowledgment or premeditation on the part of policy actors.

The productive power of language thus has important implications for the relationship between theory, policy debates and practice. Due to the socially constructed nature of our world “it is mistaken to think of theory and practice as separate spheres of activity; theory is already implicated in practice, and practice is unavoidably theoretical”.¹³ In this manner, theories assume a role in the process of constituting the world a policymaker meets, thereby composing the presuppositions that agents assume as the “fixed starting points” for political action.¹⁴ Scholars have long appreciated this role played by theories in moulding the worldviews of politicians. Economist John Maynard Keynes, for instance, maintained that:

The ideas of economists and political philosophers [...] are more powerful than is commonly understood. [...] Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist. Madmen in authority, who hear voices

2 Wendt 1987, p. 360.

3 Adler 1997, p. 325.

4 Ibid.

5 See e.g. Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; Ruggie 1997; Barnett 1999.

6 Realist and rationalist approaches to international politics hold a contrasting view, see e.g. Mearsheimer 1994, p. 13; Axelrod 1981.

7 Wallace and Hill 1996, p. 8.

8 Wendt 1999; Ruggie 1998.

9 Hopf 1998, pp. 174–77.

10 Ibid., p. 178.

11 Barnett and Duvall 2005, pp. 55–56.

12 Diez 1999, p. 603.

13 Smith 1997, p. 515.

14 Ibid.

in the air are distilling their frenzy from some academic scribbler of a few years back.¹⁵

Therefore, it is safe to assume that even President Trump, despite his pledges to break with tradition, is enmeshed in the history-bounded competition that unfolds between different discourses on America's place in the world. Traditions of foreign-policy thought can thus influence policymakers, and the influence is tangible regardless of whether these actors actually acknowledge it. In fact, "[s]tatesmen have always used certain principles to guide their actions in the uncertain and anarchic world of the international system, developing identities and postures for their nations".¹⁶ Likewise, it is feasible to expect leaders to "have a sense, whether implicitly or explicitly, of their country's national interests", and how to go about pursuing those interests.¹⁷ All this implies that the formation of an "intellectual architecture that gives structure to foreign policy"¹⁸, often termed a foreign-policy doctrine or grand-strategic orientation in the literature,¹⁹ is irredeemably theory-laden (although it can be so explicitly or implicitly, consciously or unconsciously).²⁰

DONALD TRUMP AND POST-COLD WAR FOREIGN-POLICY DEBATES

Post-Cold War contributions to debates on America's global engagement have tended to straddle a discursive space between three nodes: *liberal internationalism*, *neoconservatism* and *realism* – although each of these traditions has a longer historical pedigree.

15 Keynes 1960, p. 383.

16 Kitchen 2010, p. 119.

17 Dueck 2005, p. 198.

18 Brands 2012, p. 4.

19 There is no overarching agreement on the definition of *either* foreign-policy doctrine or grand strategy in the relevant literature. Foreign-policy doctrine is seldom defined, often used colloquially to refer to an administration's foreign policy approach in general, or employed as a synonym for grand strategy. See e.g. Jervis 2016; Dueck 2015; Drezner 2011; Goldberg 2016. Grand strategy has been used with at least three different meanings that can be distilled from the extant debates: a detailed deliberate *plan*, an *organizing principle* of policy, and a *pattern* of state conduct; see the discussion by Silove 2018. Therefore, in the name of conceptual clarity, for present purposes, a *foreign-policy doctrine* is equated with the second meaning, a constellation of ideas that are held by key policymakers and relied upon to articulate, guide and execute a state's foreign policy in a more or less coherent manner. Such an understanding is arguably reflected, for example, in the definitional exercises of grand strategy by Kitchen 2010, p. 119; Dueck 2005, p. 198 and Brands 2012, p. 4. cited above; see also Silove 2018, esp. pp. 33–34, 39–42. *Grand strategy*, on the other hand, is taken here to refer to the third meaning, the long-term "set of core pillars" that informs a great power's engagement with the world. This use of the concept is adopted by Brooks and Wohlforth 2016, pp. 75–77. The first meaning can then be received for strategies, preconceived plans that relate means to ends, and necessitate an appreciation of preferred outcomes, harnessable resources and tactics for their use in discrete spatiotemporal contexts. See Nye 2011, p. 208 for a such a general definition of strategy. All this means that while doctrines can change from administration to administration, and they can employ different strategies in different domains and regions, grand strategies tend to remain relatively consistent for long periods of time, decades, even centuries, see Brooks and Wohlforth 2016, p. 81.

20 Brands 2012, pp. 6–7.

Neoisolationism can be distinguished as a fourth alternative, which was relegated to the fringes during the Cold War years, but has enjoyed a resurgence since the 1990s.²¹ For present purposes, these traditions should be fathomed as ideal types.²² An administration's foreign-policy doctrine rarely, if ever, equates exactly with these traditions²³ – it can only more or less approximate them.²⁴ Thus framed, it is possible to escape futile either/or descriptions into which foreign-policy debates often collapse. The fourfold categorization provides a useful heuristic device for picking apart Donald Trump's emerging approach to the international arena. It is possible to distil, from each tradition, discrete views on America's global power role. For example, the approaches differ over how power should be defined and conceptualized, especially when it comes to its material and non-material building blocks (e.g. the *hard* versus *soft* power continuum).²⁵ They also offer distinguishable views on the pertinence and utility of different means of exercising power (e.g. economic, military, diplomatic or cultural). Further points of contention arise over the ends towards which, and how ambitiously, US power should be employed.

Escapology: Trump and liberal internationalism

The rise of *liberal internationalism*,²⁶ the first foreign-policy tradition, can be traced to Woodrow Wilson's presidency and his vision of an "order built around law, the consent of the governed, and the organized opinion of mankind" in the wake of World War I.²⁷ Wilson's vision, along with the League of Nations Covenant, was ultimately rebuffed at home, and America retreated to a more disengaged posture for the 1920s and 30s. However, the liberal internationalist tradition was rejuvenated during Franklin D. Roosevelt's and Harry S. Truman's presidencies during

21 This conceptualization mirrors Adam Quinn's distinction between minimalist/isolationist, realist, liberal internationalist and maximalist/neoconservative schools of thought in US foreign policy; see Quinn 2016. For a profoundly similar typology of foreign-policy traditions distinguishing between neoisolationist/nationalist America, realist America, primacist America and internationalist America, see Nau 2002, pp. 43–59.

22 "Ideal-types are thus idealized [...] descriptions of the concrete features of things that help to compare otherwise fuzzy phenomena with each other", Forsberg 2011, p. 1199.

23 See e.g. Popescu 2018; Dueck 2011; Nye 2011, p. 212.

24 For a similar argument, constructing four ideal-typical grand-strategic alternatives for US security policy, see Miller 2010; for an earlier typology see Posen and Ross 1996/97.

25 See Nye 2011, p. 21.

26 Of course, the convergence of *liberalism* per se into a "powerful political movement" can arguably be dated back to the seventeenth century and the work of John Locke; see Jahn 2018, pp. 48–49.

27 Ikenberry 2009, p. 14.

and immediately after World War II. With isolationist ideas discredited, the US would remain engaged in the world in accordance with a set of beliefs about constructing a sustainable international order.²⁸ In fact, despite the end of the Cold War, liberal internationalism has remained prominent in US foreign-policy circles throughout the 1990s and 2000s – and dangerously so, according to its critics.²⁹

Adherents of liberal internationalism view the promotion of liberal trade practices and values, including democracy, freedom and human rights, as central to America's national interests and also as constitutive of US power in the international arena. Proponents also believe that involvement in multilateral institutions is crucial to entrenching these values within international society.³⁰ When it comes to the projection of American power, liberal internationalists do not necessarily shy away from the use of military force, as exemplified by the humanitarian interventions during the Clinton presidency, or President Obama's decision to intervene in Libya during the "Arab Spring" of 2011.³¹ However, liberal internationalists also strongly emphasize the economic dimension of foreign policy and soft power tools associated with public diplomacy and the attractiveness of American values and culture.³² Another way for the US to exercise this form of power is by signalling benevolent intent with "strategic restraint". The US has resisted the (imperial) temptation to dominate weaker states by tying American power into different international institutions replete with rules and norms that also constrain its own conduct.³³ The crux of the issue is that legitimate governance exercised through institutions is less costly than rule through economic incentives, sanctions or military coercion.³⁴

The presidential election in November 2016 was seen in many circles as a referendum on the future of America's commitment to the grand strategy of "deep engagement" or "liberal hegemony" favoured by liberal internationalists.³⁵ The crux of the argument is that America should: engage in and support international institutions as the building blocks of the liberal international order; adhere to the values, norms and rules

that undergird the order; and maintain its military commitments to allies and partners around the world. These dictums are intimately linked to both realizing America's national interests and fulfilling its special responsibilities as a guarantor of international order.³⁶ Donald Trump's animosity towards the liberal internationalist programme has been well documented, and the criticism from the school's proponents has been equally staunch. In G. John Ikenberry's assessment, for instance, Trump is akin to a "hostile revisionist power", "sabotaging" the liberal international order in the name of the state that was instrumental in its creation.³⁷

As candidate and incumbent, Trump has repeatedly articulated a narrower definition of America's national interests than that espoused by the liberal internationalists. In the process, he has pledged to upend a plethora of core norms and institutions of the liberal international order.³⁸ Such sentiments are explicitly echoed in Trump's first National Security Strategy (NSS), unveiled in December 2017. In the document, the administration calls for the US to prioritize those international forums that cater to America's national interests as defined by the administration. This, of course, implies disengagement from institutions and commitments that do not.³⁹ Days into the presidency, Trump thus announced US withdrawal from the nascent Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade pact.⁴⁰ In June 2017, the president revealed his controversial decision to take the US out of the Paris Agreement on Climate Change.⁴¹ Paying little heed to the views of key allies, Trump also announced the US exit from the Iran nuclear agreement (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action or JCPOA) in May 2018, along with the reimposition of sanctions that had been lifted as part of the original Obama-era bargain. The decision has prompted broad international criticism from US allies, as well as Russia and China.⁴² Trump has also set in motion a US exit from both UNESCO and the UN Human Rights Council.⁴³ In the realm of security commitments, he has rankled NATO allies by taking almost six months to

28 Ikenberry 2015, pp. 76–78.

29 See Layne 2006a; Posen 2014; Mearsheimer and Walt 2016; Dueck 2006, pp. 121–24; Ikenberry 2012.

30 Ikenberry 2009, pp. 15–20.

31 See e.g. Dueck 2006, pp. 127–46; Lizza 2011; Osnos 2012.

32 Nye 2011; Ikenberry 2015.

33 Ikenberry 1998.

34 Reus-Smit 2007, p. 163.

35 Wright 2016; Patrick 2016; Kitchen 2016.

36 Ikenberry 2014.

37 Ikenberry 2017.

38 The US-led order has been characterised by liberal norms, which are undergirded by both institutions (e.g. the World Bank, IMF, WTO, EU) and a constellation of geopolitical arrangements (especially NATO, but also less formal military alliances and relationships). See Brands 2016, p. 2.

39 Trump 2017a.

40 Trump 2017b.

41 Trump 2017c. On Trump's climate agenda more broadly, see Mehling and Vihma 2017.

42 Trump 2018a; Hennigan 2018.

43 Haley 2017; Pompeo and Haley 2018.

explicitly endorse *Article 5* of the North Atlantic Treaty and constantly censuring allies over inequitable burden sharing – most prominently at the 2017 and 2018 NATO Summits.⁴⁴

Beyond such opposition towards the institutional edifices of the liberal international order, Trump and the administration have also challenged its value base. Trump has been muted in his criticism of Russian President Vladimir Putin and taken an ambivalent stance on Moscow’s meddling in the 2016 presidential elections, even when given the opportunity to publicly press Putin on the issue at the Helsinki summit in July 2018.⁴⁵ He has also praised the conduct of strongmen like Abdel Fattah al-Sisi of Egypt and Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines.⁴⁶ In a spectacular about-face, Trump has even professed his affinity for North Korean dictator Kim Jong-un, despite the fact that the denuclearization process initiated at their Singapore meeting in June 2018 has not yielded much tangible progress.⁴⁷

Although the US has engaged with such leaders in the past, human rights rhetoric has been noticeably absent in the Trump administration’s public statements.⁴⁸ Former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson even made a point of laying out how America’s interests might be harmed by keeping such concerns at the forefront.⁴⁹ Under the tutelage of Mike Pompeo, the State Department has criticized allies like Egypt and Saudi Arabia for human rights abuses, but has continued using so-called national security waivers to channel military support to these countries.⁵⁰ President Trump has also charted an uncharacteristic route in his two speeches before the UN General Assembly by placing “sovereignty” and “patriotism” centre stage in place of values like freedom, democracy and human rights, all of which an American president could be expected to raise in such forums.⁵¹ Judging by rhetoric and policy practice, the lines devoted to the defence of American values in the administration’s NSS should duly be taken with a pinch of salt.⁵²

Conflicted affinities: Trump’s relationship with neoconservatism

The roots of neoconservatism, the second foreign-policy tradition, can be traced back to the 1960s and 70s, and the desire of its founding generation to combat “moral relativism”, “anti-intellectualism” and “culture and practices of the anti-Vietnam war movement”.⁵³ The “original” neoconservatives, the likes of Irving Kristol and Norman Podhoretz, had made an intellectual journey from the left to the right, and were concerned with establishing a stable domestic social order grounded upon “a moral code” and “a virtuous citizenry”.⁵⁴ Their foreign-policy leitmotif, insofar as one existed, was vehement opposition of Soviet Communism. After the end of the Cold War and the bipolar power struggle, a new generation of neoconservatives moved beyond domestic mundanities and became increasingly preoccupied with foreign-policy questions. They thus refracted the moral-laden approach of their forebears towards the international arena.⁵⁵

Although a heterogeneous group, neoconservatives agree with liberal internationalists on the importance of promoting America’s values abroad, especially those pertaining to so-called negative freedoms.⁵⁶ In this sense they, too, have been billed heirs of Woodrow Wilson.⁵⁷ Neoconservatives appear unwavering in the (religiously-grounded) conviction that they represent the morally virtuous in a global battle between “good” and “evil”.⁵⁸ Relatedly, and unlike multilaterally-inclined liberal internationalists, neoconservatives are willing to pursue US interests and promote its values unilaterally. This can mean shunning multilateral alliances on a case-by-case basis, and even circumventing international legal constraints on the use of military force. Neoconservatives, like some realists (see below), also embrace the maintenance of America’s military primacy in the international system as a foreign policy priority. Economic and soft power are at best auxiliary means of achieving foreign policy goals.⁵⁹ The hyper-active unilateralism of the George W. Bush presidency, especially during his first term in the wake of 9/11, has been framed by both defenders and critics as the

44 Trump 2017d; Sevastopolu and Peel 2018a.

45 FP Staff 2018.

46 Landler 2017; Trump 2017e.

47 Harris 2018.

48 Margon 2018.

49 Tillerson 2017.

50 See Nissenbaum 2018; Toosi 2018. Similar dilemmas have, naturally, plagued previous administrations as well, see Sinkkonen 2015.

51 Trump 2017f; Trump 2018b.

52 Trump 2017a.

53 Dumbrell 2008, p. 21.

54 Homolar-Riechmann 2009, pp. 182–183.

55 *Ibid.*, pp. 180–181; Halper and Clarke 2004, pp. 180–181.

56 On the distinction between negative and positive freedom, see Berlin 1969, pp. 118–72.

57 Smith 2009.

58 Halper and Clarke 2004, pp. 11, 22–26.

59 Singh 2014, pp. 30–31; Reus-Smit 2004, pp. 33–38; Kagan 2003.

golden age of the neoconservative foreign-policy vision.⁶⁰

Interestingly, many of the above-described policy stances and actions by the Trump team could also have been taken by a president espousing a neoconservative agenda. Recalling George W. Bush's foreign policy record suffices to prove the point. He, for instance, "unsigned" the Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC), abandoned the Kyoto protocol, sanctioned an extraordinary rendition programme with enhanced interrogation techniques, and paid little heed to the lack of a UN Security Council resolution authorizing the US invasion of Iraq.⁶¹ In a nod to the neoconservative legacy, Trump has even appointed the hawkish John Bolton as his National Security Advisor, replacing the more moderate H. R. McMaster in the process. As George W. Bush's Undersecretary for Arms Control and International Security and UN Ambassador, Bolton was a staunch defender of the Iraq War, and has already resumed his Bush-era criticism of the ICC and multilateral institutions more broadly.⁶² Judging by his recent writings, Bolton also continues to support military measures against "rogue regimes".⁶³

In President Trump's narrative of national decline, America has been the perennial loser during the tenures of his predecessors, and is no longer respected internationally.⁶⁴ Alongside revitalizing US economic strength through renegotiated trade agreements (see below), the incumbent has thus pledged to rectify this state of affairs by building a great military. The John S. McCain National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year (FY) 2019, which Trump signed into law on September 13, 2018, would mark a second year of substantial increases in military spending.⁶⁵ This, along with the previous FY 2018 NDAA, would amount to an almost 100 billion increase in the Pentagon's budget since Trump took office.⁶⁶ Recent reports indicate that the trend of budget increases might be thwarted in FY 2020, with the Pentagon currently working on two "parallel budgets", one totalling \$700 billion and the

other \$733 billion.⁶⁷ Be that as it may, the administration's preoccupation with the military, which it has thus far sought to couple with cuts to the State Department and foreign aid, has attracted criticism from former diplomats, retired generals as well as lawmakers from both parties.⁶⁸ Although Congress thwarted drastic cuts to the State Department for FY 2018 and may well do so again for FY 2019,⁶⁹ the message that the administration has sent so far is clear: its focus will be on military power, not "soft" or "civilian" tools.⁷⁰

Despite these apparent parallels, neoconservative policy pundits, animated not only by their conviction in the muscular defence of American interests but also in the promotion of US values, have criticized Trump's forays in the Oval Office.⁷¹ The omission of value-based rhetoric and policy justifications is, indeed, the most obvious difference between the Trumpian and neoconservative approaches to foreign policy. Trump does not appear to believe in America's destiny to actively remake the world in its own image, which neoconservatives, in turn, regard as the core of American exceptionalism. Charles Krauthammer, for example, maintained that "America First" is the "antithesis" of such an approach to the world, because it "makes America no different from all the other countries that define themselves by a particularist blood-and-soil nationalism".⁷² Robert Kagan has similarly lamented Trump's unwillingness to espouse America's calling as the "indispensable nation".⁷³

However, the fact that Trump by and large shuns the promotion of liberal values does not mean that his foreign policy is devoid of an ideational basis. In particular, Trump has evoked terms like "civilization" and "rogue states",⁷⁴ notions that also featured in the War-on-Terror lexicon that the George W. Bush administration adopted.⁷⁵ Trump thus appears to be operating within a *Clash of Civilizations* framework, something Bush was also criticized for.⁷⁶ This controversial thesis

60 Cf. Reus-Smit 2004, pp. 32–33; Krauthammer 2005; Schmidt and Williams 2008, pp. 191–220. For a view attributing less influence to the neoconservatives, see Daalder and Lindsay 2003, pp. 15–16.

61 See e.g. Hastings Dunn 2006; Daalder and Lindsay 2003.

62 Sevastopulo and Peel 2018b.

63 For Bolton's views on "rogue regimes", see Bolton 2017; 2018.

64 Trump 2017g.

65 White House 2018a.

66 Sharp 2018; Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller) 2018a; White House 2017.

67 The \$700 billion budget would actually represent a decrease of 2.2 per cent compared to the FY 2019 figure of \$716 billion. If the administration proposes decreases in defence spending, considerable wrangling between "defence hawks" and "deficit hawks" in Congress, especially within the ranks of the Republican Party, can be expected. For discussion, see Mehta 2018.

68 See e.g. U.S. Global Leadership Coalition 2017; Morello and Gearan 2017.

69 Kaplan 2018; Berman 2018; Rogin 2018.

70 "Civilian power" was a term popularized by Hillary Clinton as Secretary of State, meant to draw attention to the role of public diplomacy in fostering America's international influence; see Clinton 2010. See also Director of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) Mick Mulvaney's remarks on how the Trump administration crafts "hard power" budgets, Mulvaney 2017.

71 Franko 2016.

72 Krauthammer 2017a.

73 Kagan 2016; 2017.

74 Trump 2017f; 2017h; 2018b.

75 Müller 2014; Kennedy 2013.

76 Kennedy 2013; Rachman 2017.

is attributed to Samuel P. Huntington, who argued that the post-Cold War world will not be animated by differences over ideology, politics or economics. Instead, peoples' primary affinities will revolve around culture: in a "multipolar" and "multicivilizational" world, "cultural commonalities and differences shape the interests, antagonisms and associations of states".⁷⁷ Huntington thus posited that large-scale conflicts in the 21st century will follow civilizational lines, the most pressing scenario being a clash between Muslims and non-Muslims.⁷⁸

Even while on the campaign trail, Trump spoke of the need to "reinvigorate Western values and institutions".⁷⁹ His July 2017 speech in Warsaw picked up the same script:

*Americans, Poles, and the nations of Europe value individual freedom and sovereignty. We must work together to confront forces, whether they come from inside or out, from the South or the East, that threaten over time to undermine these values and to erase the bonds of culture, faith and tradition that make us who we are. If left unchecked, these forces will undermine our courage, sap our spirit, and weaken our will to defend ourselves and our societies.*⁸⁰

Trump thus purports to speak in the name and defence of a mythical (and exclusivist) Judeo-Christian and Western civilizational identity.⁸¹ This confined community of common faith (and fate) is threatened by external forces like terrorist organizations or rogue regimes, grouped together as "the enemies of all civilization".⁸² Such remarks, combined with the use of loaded phrases like "radical Islamic terrorism" or "the wicked few" in other key policy speeches, suggest that for President Trump and his coterie these threats are existential in nature, and must be exorcised from the American and global societal bodies.⁸³ In his May 2017 speech to Arab leaders in Riyadh, no less, Trump established clear links between terrorism, barbarism and evil: "Barbarism will deliver you no glory – piety to evil will bring you no dignity. If you choose the path of terror, your life will be empty, your life will be brief, and YOUR SOUL WILL BE CONDEMNED".⁸⁴

This is a pronouncedly Manichean view of international politics, framing the international as an arena where the "good" forces of Christianity and "evil" cohorts of "radical Islam" are in a perennial conflict.⁸⁵

A Trumpian brand of realism?

The realist approach to international politics, the third tradition, has arguably been the predominant paradigm for the study of international politics in the post-Second World War era. Realism is an intellectual horizon spanning millennia, from the Athens of Thucydides through the Florence of Niccolò Machiavelli and the England of Thomas Hobbes to the seminal IR works of E. H. Carr and Hans Morgenthau.⁸⁶ Coincidentally, it has also been the paradigm against which other theoretical approaches to international politics have routinely been juxtaposed. At the same time, however, realists have long lamented the limited influence of their ideas on day-to-day foreign-policy making.⁸⁷

Realism is a broad and heterogeneous school of IR theorizing and foreign-policy thought, but its proponents tend to agree on certain core premises. Realists regard the international system as anarchical (as opposed to hierarchical) in nature, and argue that it is inhabited by states bent on survival. This, in turn, means that these states are locked in persistent competition for power. Moreover, realists focus on relative as opposed to absolute gains in power capabilities, further underlining the zero-sum nature of competition within international anarchy.⁸⁸ The preoccupation with anarchy and power in its material form leads proponents of the school to argue that states will (and should) act in a self-interested manner, paying little heed to the interests of the international community or values like democracy and human rights. The spread of such values is, at best, a welcome side effect of pursuing national interests. At worst, such eloquent goals could divert attention away from the true task of a nation's leadership: survival. For realists, it is the *sine qua non* of states in the international system. As states are always uncertain of the intentions of others, the most surefire way to survive is to accumulate power capabilities.⁸⁹

77 Huntington 2002, p. 29.

78 Ibid., pp. 312–13.

79 Trump 2016.

80 Trump 2017h.

81 In the speech Trump used "civilization" five times, and referred to the "West" on ten occasions. Ibid.; see also Krastev 2017; Beinart 2017.

82 Trump 2017h.

83 Trump 2017f; 2017g; 2017i.

84 Trump 2017j; capitals in original.

85 Cf. Kennedy 2013; Müller 2014.

86 See e.g. Lebow 2010; Schmidt 2007.

87 See e.g. Schmidt and Williams 2008; Walt 2012.

88 Mearsheimer 2001, pp. 17–18; Wohlforth 2008, pp. 133–35.

89 Mearsheimer 2001, pp. 31–33.

Beyond these core premises, proponents of realism diverge on how much material power states seek to accumulate in order to ensure their survival, namely whether they aim for material preponderance (primacy or hegemony), or seek to maintain the prevalent balance of power. In this vein, there is disagreement on the level of ambition that animates great powers within the international system.⁹⁰ This distinction between *hegemonic* and *balance-of-power* realism is particularly relevant when it comes to the policy prescriptions that realist thinkers might be willing to offer foreign-policy makers.⁹¹ It is thus important to keep in mind that as a theory and tradition of foreign-policy thought, realism is more protestant than catholic in inclination – many churches can be accommodated under its broad banner.

Some contemporary realists remain wedded to the idea that America can maintain its unique unipolar position in the post-Cold War international system. This can be achieved by retaining the commitment to international military and economic leadership – in short, by pursuing a grand strategy of “deep engagement” or “liberal hegemony”. From this standpoint, “the chief threat [to sustained American hegemony] is U.S. failure to do enough”.⁹² Another prominent prong of realist thinkers have challenged this wisdom, and instead call for a grand strategy of “retrenchment” or “offshore balancing” to scale back America’s overseas engagements, effectively a narrower definition of American national interests. The focus should be shifted from maintaining a global military footprint to making sure key regions (Europe, Northeast Asia and the Persian Gulf) do not fall under the rule of a hostile regional hegemon. Such an approach, these realists claim, would avoid the dangers of overstretch that a policy bent on the promotion of liberal-democratic values might create, but still retain America’s place at the top of the global power hierarchy.⁹³

During the 2016 election season, various contributors pointed to the marriage between Trump’s foreign policy views and IR realism.⁹⁴ Given Trump’s voiced opposition to the liberal internationalist programme, it is hardly surprising that realist scholars, especially in the retrenchment camp, have embraced the president’s approach to the international arena. Randall

Schweller, for instance, draws on recent survey research that shows US public opinion to be more realist in foreign policy orientation than the views of elites,⁹⁵ and argues that:

*[T]he Trump administration represents an opportunity to base U.S. foreign policy on the real interests of the American people as they themselves perceive them to be rather than what Washington elites take to be the interest of U.S. global primacy.*⁹⁶

John J. Mearsheimer, similarly, counselled Trump to adopt a realist foreign policy to combat the liberal hegemony pursued by the Washington foreign policy establishment.⁹⁷ In both these readings, Trump’s “America First” and “Make America Great Again” slogans reflect the potential for a long-overdue realization: America can maintain its military pre-eminence and cater to its interests by moving “offshore” – and then demand that allies take more ownership of their security. At the same time, the US temptation to undertake expensive nation building in faraway places would be reduced.

In fact, Trump’s national security team has put forth a worldview that approximates certain realist tenets, captured in the 2017 NSS under the moniker “principled realism”. For Trump and his team, the world is an arena of competition between sovereign states, of which the great powers are the most important. These states are engaged in an incessant competition over quantifiable power resources (e.g. military, economic, diplomatic), which takes place in various domains (e.g. land, air, sea and cyber).⁹⁸ The synopsis of the National Defense Strategy, similarly, cites the “reemergence of long-term, strategic competition” against “revisionist powers”, China and Russia in particular, as “the central challenge to U.S. prosperity and security”.⁹⁹ In fact, the US slapped 25 per cent import tariffs on a total of \$50 billion of Chinese goods in June and August 2018, which were then compounded with 10 per cent tariffs on a further \$200 billion worth of products in September.¹⁰⁰ Such willingness by the Trump administration to target China with wide-ranging trade restrictions indicates that it is willing to go further than its predecessors

90 Cf. *ibid.*; Waltz 1979; Layne 2006b; Gilpin 1983.

91 Deudney and Ikenberry 2017.

92 Wohlforth 1999, p. 8; see also Brooks and Wohlforth 2016.

93 Mearsheimer and Walt 2016; Posen 2014; Layne 2009.

94 Drezner 2016; Brooks 2016.

95 For the seminal study, see Drezner 2008.

96 Schweller 2017, p. 3.

97 Mearsheimer 2016.

98 Trump 2017a; McMaster and Cohn 2017. For the most expansive account of Trump’s realist credentials written so far, see Schweller 2018.

99 US Department of Defense 2018; see also Pence 2018.

100 Bown and Kolb 2018.

in recognizing and combatting Beijing's perceived geo-economic challenge to US hegemony.¹⁰¹ In doing so, Trump appears prepared to bear the potential risks: considerable damage to global trade flows, disruptions to the international trade system and complex value chains, erosion of US companies' competitive advantages, and increases in consumer prices.¹⁰²

No isolationist after all: Trump and the transactionalist mindset

Neoisolationism, the fourth school of thought, takes the argument to disengage from global commitments further than retrenchment realists – proponents of this school would not, for instance, regard the rise of a hostile regional hegemon in Eurasia as sufficient reason to return “onshore”.¹⁰³ Isolationism can be broadly conceived as a shifting mixture of non-interventionist and unilateralist policy prescriptions.¹⁰⁴ Its roots can be traced to the founding of the republic and the idea that the US, given its fortuitous geographical position, should remain aloof from Europe's great-power disputes – a sentiment famously echoed, for instance, in George Washington's warnings against permanent alliances, and John Quincy Adams' dictum that the US “goes not abroad in search of monsters to destroy”.¹⁰⁵ In fact, isolationism remained a pertinent, if not dominant, strand of foreign-policy thought until the end of the Second World War.¹⁰⁶ As a term, isolationism tends to have negative connotations, particularly in its evocation of the 1930s and the “America First” movement that sought to keep the US out of World War II.¹⁰⁷ Proponents of isolationism, can, however, be found on both the right and left of the political spectrum.¹⁰⁸

The post-Cold War proponents of isolationist policy prescriptions have made an effort to distance themselves from this interwar legacy, particularly when it comes to economic protectionism.¹⁰⁹ Nevertheless, like their isolationist forebears, neoisolationists call for

the abandonment of America's role as liberal hegemon in favour of putting its own house in order. From this standpoint, America's pursuit and maintenance of superpower status and entangling global engagements – massive defence spending and US military presence in Europe, Asia and the Middle East, in particular – has made it less secure and economically less well off.¹¹⁰ Much like realist advocates of offshore balancing, neo-isolationists claim that America's deep engagement with the world is a folly maintained by foreign-policy experts and the elite, which, so the argument goes, holds little appeal among the broader public.¹¹¹

Upon closer reflection, however, the oft-cited description of Trump's policy approach as *isolationist* misses the mark.¹¹² Most obviously, the president has to date remained committed to building up US military power, and he has also shown a propensity to utilize it. This was evident in Trump's decision to strike Syria with missiles in the aftermath of chemical weapons attacks on civilians by the Bashar Al-Assad regime (in April 2017 and again in April 2018),¹¹³ as well as in the decision to sanction troop increases in Afghanistan.¹¹⁴ Trump's administration has even agreed to the sale of lethal weapons to Ukraine, and strengthened US financial commitment to the European Deterrence Initiative (EDI) to deter Russian aggression in Europe.¹¹⁵

In fact, Donald Trump's approach to the international arena is better described as *transactionalist*, which can also accommodate selective isolationist impulses.¹¹⁶ Transactionalism is best described as a mindset, a “leadership style” that informs foreign-policy conduct.¹¹⁷ President Trump's inclination is to boil politics down to discrete “deals”. He holds an unnerving belief in his ability to strike the best bargain, defined in accordance with his perception of America's national interests. The realization of these interests is invariably represented in terms of relative as opposed to absolute (economic) gains – the point is to *win* more than others, not to achieve pareto-optimal outcomes.¹¹⁸ Transactionalism is then, by definition, bilateral in nature.¹¹⁹ It is grounded on specific as

101 For perspectives on geo-economics, see Wigell, Scholvin and Aaltola 2018.

102 Brown 2018, pp. 16–19; Strauss 2018.

103 Art 2003, p. 176; Gholz, Press and Sapolsky 1997.

104 Johnstone 2011, pp. 8–10.

105 Washington 1796; Adams 1821.

106 For this argument, see e.g. Art 2003, pp. 172–175; Ruggie 1997.

107 Quinn 2007, p. 527.

108 On the right, Cato Institute, the libertarian think tank, is a prominent voice in this regard, as are former Republican congressman Ron Paul and his son, senator Rand Paul, along with commentator/politician/former presidential hopeful Patrick Buchanan. See e.g. Quinn 2007, pp. 527–529. Michael Walzer argues that the default position of the left has been to focus on domestic injustices. Insofar as it can be said to have a common foreign policy position, this has revolved around anti-interventionism and anti-imperialism. Walzer 2018, pp. 1–3.

109 Gholz, Press and Sapolsky 1997, p. 5.

110 Ibid.

111 Preble 2015; 2017; see also Schweller 2017; Drezner 2008.

112 Cf. Ganesh 2018; North Patterson 2018; Krauthammer 2017b; Zajec 2018.

113 Trump 2017k; 2018c.

114 Trump 2017l.

115 Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller) 2018b.

116 Stokes 2018, pp. 135–138; Stephens 2017; Kahl and Brands 2017; Hadar 2017; Nye 2017.

117 Nye 2014, pp. 118–24.

118 Stephens 2017; Kahl and Brands 2017.

119 Stokes 2018, p. 137.

opposed to diffuse reciprocity,¹²⁰ which means that international politics becomes reduced to a string of one-off commodity exchanges. Benefits will accrue accordingly in the short term, but agreements that require a longer time period to produce returns do not fit into the transactionalist model. All this renders the transactionalist mindset both issue-specific and pronouncedly ahistorical.¹²¹

During the course of his tenure, Trump has not shied away from aggravating America's traditional allies and partners over issues he has placed at the top of the policy agenda. Any deal that the Trump administration deems non-advantageous to the US may come up for termination, reappraisal or renegotiation. Particularly disquieting for US allies was Trump's announcement to renegotiate the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in May 2017,¹²² but the imposition of tariffs on all steel and aluminum imports in March 2018 has also caused a stir.¹²³ To further signal distrust towards traditional partners, the tariffs were grounded on Section 232 of the Trade Expansion Act of 1962, which allows the White House to levy them to address national security threats.¹²⁴ Nevertheless, in the spirit of transactionalism, it remains possible that Trump's most drastic trade forays will be selectively harnessed for those trade relationships (especially bilateral trade with China) and deals (so far only the TPP) whose terms the administration views *most* detrimental to US interests. Partners may thus be able to strike bargains that mitigate Trump's isolationist impulses. For instance, the renegotiation process of NAFTA – now rebranded as the United States–Mexico–Canada Agreement (USMCA) pending ratification by the parties – shows that it is possible to strike a workable deal with the US, as long as the president is allowed to sell the end result as a victory to his domestic base.¹²⁵ This also appears to have been the case when European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker persuaded Trump in July 2018 to refrain from pursuing levies on European cars in return for an EU pledge to purchase more American soybeans and liquefied natural gas.¹²⁶

TRANSACTIONALIST REALISM – POTENTIAL PITFALLS OF THE EMERGING “TRUMP DOCTRINE”

The above discussion has sought to illustrate that the Trumpian foreign-policy approach is an amalgamation of different traditions of American foreign-policy thought. The president and his administration adopt components of neoconservatism from the George W. Bush era (eschewing cumbersome multilateralism and relying on civilizations-based rhetoric) and realism (emphasizing material power capabilities and espousing a zero-sum view of global competition). In addition, Trump's transactionalist bent (undermining multilateral rules and institutions of global trade rhetorically, but rejecting them on a case-by-case basis in practice) has at times been conflated with an isolationist foreign policy programme. In this sense, President Trump is embedded in American foreign-policy traditions just as his predecessors have been, regardless of the desire among critics to dismiss him as fundamentally non-ideological.¹²⁷ However, this particular Trumpian combination of traditions, what we might term *transactionalist realism with civilizational undertones*, is replete with foreign-policy cul-de-sacs that warrant further scrutiny.

The first of these dilemmas derives from Trump's drive to foster international respect for the United States by concentrating on the build-up of material *power capabilities*, erecting barriers to trade and greeting the world as a zero-sum competitive realm. The second is tied to *power and purpose*: the Trump administration's efforts to replace the values that America has traditionally advocated in the international arena with civilizational, even nationalist, tropes. The third deals with how the transactionalist mindset might adversely affect the *prudent use of American power* when addressing real-world foreign policy problems.

Power as capabilities: Forfeiting and fostering international influence

As already established, Donald Trump and his coterie have adopted a relatively straightforward view on the role of (American) power in the international system. Trump and his administration equate power with accumulated capabilities measured in terms of economic

120 Ruggie 1992; Rathbun 2011.

121 Rothkopf 2017.

122 Swanson 2017.

123 Trump 2017m. The tariffs remain in effect for most US allies. Exemptions are in place for South Korea (steel), Brazil (steel) and Argentina (steel and aluminium), all of which have agreed to quota restrictions on their exports. Australia is exempt without any quotas in place. See White House 2018b; Toubia et al. 2018.

124 Ikenson 2018b.

125 Kirby 2018; Politi et al. 2018.

126 White House 2018c; Müller and Reiermann 2018.

127 Chait 2017; Friedman Lissner and Zenko 2017.

and military resources. At the same time, President Trump has explicitly stated that he craves “respect” and wants to restore America’s international status so that the US will no longer be taken advantage of.¹²⁸ A more intellectually-oriented defence of this approach is provided by Michael Anton, the Deputy Assistant to the President for Strategic Communications until April 2018 and staunch defender of Trump’s policy views during the presidential campaign. Anton argues that nations crave “peace”, “prestige” and “prosperity”. Peace is understood in a constricted sense as the absence of an attack on the American continent, prestige is created by “strength, wealth and the sense of being a rising [...] rather than a declining power”, whilst prosperity can be attained by replacing the “disadvantageous” free trade consensus with a “policy based on core interests and commercial realities”.¹²⁹ At present, it seems that Trump is heeding this script and remains intent on attaining these “core interests” by bolstering US military resources and engaging in transactionalist relative-gains-based economic diplomacy.

There is a perennial debate in the literature on power between proponents of the above-described power as capabilities approach, which Trump and his administration adhere to, and those who understand power as a relationship between two actors.¹³⁰ In the latter case, power is customarily fathomed as: “a relationship (actual or potential) in which the behavior of actor A at least partially causes a change in the behavior of actor B”.¹³¹ Power, thus comprehended, has a social dimension, which lends agency to both the power wielder and the subject of power.¹³² In fact, according to proponents of the relational power approach, by deducing behavioural change from capacity, the power as capabilities approach omits important actor-level variables:

*The capacity to sanction and the resources on which the sanctions are based are a part of power analysis, but in themselves insufficient to attribute power, since what counts as a sanction in the specific power relation is itself dependent on the specific values and preferences in the minds of the people involved.*¹³³

By equating international “respect”, “status” and “prestige” – all essentially social variables – with

America’s *potential* capacity to awe other states with its military prowess and economic muscle, Trump and his administration are committing a sin that contemporary realist students of IR are often criticized for. They are confusing the possession of power capabilities with the ability to *influence* other actors in the international arena.¹³⁴

A related problem with Trump’s constricted view of power can be boiled down to an old adage: “when you have a hammer, everything starts to look like a nail”. The president has gravitated towards two particular ways of exercising US power: economic and military *coercion*. In the economic realm this risks overreliance on barriers to trade and sanctions.¹³⁵ As for the military aspect, Trump has been criticized for accentuating the “militarization” of US foreign policy. This trend is visible in the administration’s budget priorities to date, the president’s penchant for appointing active-duty and retired military officers to key civilian positions, as well as his reported willingness to grant the military considerable discretion on the use of force.¹³⁶

Particularly perplexing given Trump’s penchant for monetizing issues, is his unwillingness to heed the lessons of the Second Iraq War – America’s most spectacular foreign-policy blunder of the 21st century. From a chiefly rationalist perspective, it is shortsighted to employ combative rhetoric and to pursue policies that can alienate potential allies who would be prepared to share burdens when push comes to shove. Trump seems utterly unaware of how successful the United States has been in institutionalizing and embedding its material power advantage into the framework of post-World War II international institutions.

A relational and social definition of power, shunned by Trump and his entourage, points to the inescapable linkages between the exercise of power, production of legitimacy and the achievement of favourable policy outcomes. If power is perceived as relational and social, “non-material factors [...] including ideas, beliefs, norms, and rules” become relevant, and can be viewed as constitutive of power.¹³⁷ From this standpoint, there is an inherent risk in “illegitimate behaviour” that is at odds with the “accepted morality of the age”.¹³⁸ A self-inflicted “legitimacy crisis” may render the exercise of power costly. This is because the power wielder

128 *New York Times* 2017.

129 Anton 2017.

130 Baldwin 2013; Reus-Smit 2004.

131 Baldwin 2013, p. 274.

132 Reus-Smit 2004, pp. 55–63.

133 Guzzini 2013, p. 5.

134 Reich and Lebow 2014, p. 31.

135 Morello 2018; cf. Gady 2015.

136 DeJonge Schulman and Schafer 2017.

137 Reus-Smit 2007, p. 162.

138 Lebow 2010, p. 38.

cannot rely on “non-self-interested voluntary compliance” brought about by adherence to commonly-held norms, rules and values.¹³⁹ An illegitimate leviathan is forced to “rule through the maintenance of a regime of credible threats” – a costly and volatile exercise.¹⁴⁰ Relatedly, fostering soft power carries the potential of creating reverence at a fraction of the cost of building up military capacity.¹⁴¹ Therefore, by turning its back on international institutional fora and downplaying the importance of public diplomacy and development cooperation, the Trump administration is eluding a major prong of America’s potential to shape the international milieu.

Power and purpose: From liberal to civilizational hegemony?

Realist scholars like John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt have argued that parts of Trump’s initially transformative agenda have been taken over by the Washington foreign policy establishment. This is partly a result of Trump’s own inexperience, but also a function of his inability to staff the foreign-policy team with advisors and cabinet members who share his “America First” instincts.¹⁴² (However, it appears that those instincts might not have been exactly what such scholars considered them to be in the first place.) In fact, Barry Posen posits that Trump is not overseeing a turn to a more humble American foreign policy of “offshore balancing”. He is instead shifting from “liberal hegemony”, where America has justified its global engagement with reference to propping up the liberal international order, towards “illiberal hegemony”, where a hegemon acquires power for the sake of power.¹⁴³

Upon closer reflection, however, the situation appears more nuanced. With Trump at the helm, the US is not merely seeking to maintain global primacy without any higher purpose. Instead, as already argued above, his foreign policy has an ideational basis. Trump marries together “America First” tropes that stress prosperity and security at home with a muscular foreign policy that seeks to maintain at least a

semblance of international order (by, for instance, combatting rogue regimes that pose threats to *both* US security and international peace). In this sense, the president is fulfilling an aspiration for America to be the leader of a group of sovereign nation states that are held together not by shared liberal norms, but by civilizational affinities and a commitment to sovereign nationalism. Henry Nau, for instance, argues that the type of nationalism Trump is advocating can be understood as internationalist in nature:

*The goal [of the America First agenda] is a ‘re-publican world,’ one in which free nations live side by side, responsible for their own defenses and economies, and cut deals with other nations, including authoritarian ones, to the extent their interests overlap.*¹⁴⁴

In Nau’s view, only such a world of sovereign states can “accommodate genuine multicultural diversity”.¹⁴⁵

The problem with such arguments is that Donald Trump does not appear to be embracing a healthy republican brand of nationalism, one that would allow for diversity to flourish, either at home or abroad. Examples abound from his first year and a half in office: the hastily rolled out travel ban a week into his presidency targeting predominantly Muslim nations and their citizens;¹⁴⁶ Trump’s persistent insistence on building “the Wall” to keep out criminal elements from Mexico;¹⁴⁷ the drive to end the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) programme;¹⁴⁸ the policy of separating immigrant families on the US-Mexico border;¹⁴⁹ and unwillingness to unequivocally condemn violence by right-wing groups during the August 2017 protests in Charlottesville.¹⁵⁰ All of these are ample illustrations that Trump’s policies may further deepen dividing lines not only in America but also internationally. This is not an inclusive brand of patriotism that people of different political inclination, religious conviction, race or ethnicity can relate to.

A similar conundrum arises with respect to Trump’s evocation of civilizational affinities as a driving force behind a common “Western” front for confronting threats and challenges, most notably transnational threat organizations and “rogue states”. In this sense,

139 There are already visible signs of such legitimacy costs: a Pew poll in the summer of 2018 found that global perceptions of the United States have taken a negative turn during Trump’s presidency. The Portland and USC Center on Public Diplomacy Soft Power 30 ranking has also dropped the US from first to fourth place in a span of two years. See Wike et al. 2018, esp. pp. 18–19; Portland and USC Center on Public Diplomacy 2018.

140 Reus-Smit 2007, p. 163.

141 Nye 2011.

142 Beauchamp 2018; Davison 2018; Walt 2018.

143 Posen 2018.

144 Nau 2017.

145 Ibid.

146 Trump 2017n.

147 Hirschfeld Davis and Semple 2018.

148 Cowan and Makini 2018.

149 Rucker 2018.

150 Shear and Haberman 2017.

Trump's vision aspires to "civilizational hegemony" – the "West" must be reawakened as a value-based, but not necessarily liberal, political community. The argument against such civilizational framings was already well rehearsed in the 1990s, when Huntington popularized the Clash of Civilizations thesis, and continued during the George W. Bush presidency as a rebuttal of the president's attempts to frame the War on Terror as a struggle for civilization. Critics maintain that there is an othering impulse built into the evocation of essentialized identity-based cultural spheres, which risks creating, reproducing and reifying the said categories.¹⁵¹ Inter-civilizational struggles may thus become self-fulfilling prophecies, eroding as opposed to fostering America's ability to lead, and even threatening the long-term sustainability of the international order.¹⁵²

Power and prudence: Realism and the transactionalist mindset

Donald Trump's transactionalist leadership style has also been critiqued for being blatantly amoral. Of course, it is naïve to expect states to conduct their foreign policies in a completely other-regarding manner. Chris Brown points to the analytical futility of employing both "pop realist" arguments, which call for unqualified egoism, and "moral absolutism", which regards all self-interested behaviour as worthy of rebuke.¹⁵³ In fact, foreign policy – or politics in general, for that matter – can be thought of as a "tragic exercise".¹⁵⁴ Engagement with the world is irredeemably riddled with moral dilemmas between catering to the interests of the state, narrowly defined, and the wider interests of international society (or even all of humanity).¹⁵⁵ These inclinations can be at odds with each other, but this does not mean that they cannot at times converge, or that the choice is always either unwavering egoism or wholehearted espousal of others' concerns. Even most traditions of realism counsel against blatant selfishness for its own sake, and accept "that although enlightened self-interest is difficult to achieve in conditions of international anarchy, it is still morally desirable to think long rather than short

term".¹⁵⁶ Moreover, as the realist and liberal internationalist advocates of deep engagement have spelled out at length, the pursuit of long-term interests that cater to others' demand for international public goods can also be framed in terms of America's self-interest.¹⁵⁷ It all boils down to a temporal perspective.

These questions of morality and temporality bring the argument back full circle to Donald Trump's realist foreign policy credentials. Following in the footsteps of classical realists like E. H. Carr and Hans Morgenthau, realism should be understood not merely as a tradition stressing the anarchical and competitive nature of the international, but also as "a sensibility rooted in a mature sense of the tragic".¹⁵⁸ Lurking behind this tragic view of the international is the need for *prudence* in political action. In fact, classical realists are animated by both the "moral precept of prudence *and* the political requirement of success",¹⁵⁹ so "[t]here can be no political morality without prudence, that is, without consideration of the political consequences of seemingly moral [and, we dare add, immoral] action".¹⁶⁰

Writing in the wake of the Second World War, Morgenthau also argued that the exercise of power over our fellow men, the political act itself, is imbued with evil. In his Hobbesian reading, this state of affairs is inescapable because man has an innate lust for power which, although precipitating moral condemnation if exercised for the gratification of the self, becomes acceptable when exercised for the benefit of the state.¹⁶¹ The lust for power as manifest in the political realm can never be entirely checked by the universal ethical standard of doing good, which is reserved for the private sphere. However, these ethical standards should still guide political action towards choosing the least of available evils.¹⁶² In light of the policies pursued during his first year, it remains doubtful whether such a moral compass of prudence and the ability to think long-term rather than in a shortsighted and ad-hoc manner actually inform Donald Trump's foreign policy.

151 Walt 1997; Bottici and Challand 2006.

152 Walt 2017.

153 Brown 2001. For a similar argument on moral absolutism see Walzer 2018.

154 Lebow 2003.

155 Brown 2001; Finnemore 2008; Price 2008.

156 Brown 2001, p. 24.

157 Brooks, Ikenberry and Wohlforth 2012; Ikenberry 1998.

158 Kaplan 2016.

159 Morgenthau 1955, p. 7.

160 *Ibid.*, p. 9.

161 Morgenthau 1945, p. 15.

162 *Ibid.*, p. 17.

CONCLUSION: THE FUTURE OF AMERICAN POWER IN THE TRUMP ERA

The preceding discussion has argued that judging by his foreign policy, Donald J. Trump is not a blank slate devoid of an overarching approach to the international arena. Instead, the emerging “Trump doctrine” should be treated as an amalgamation of the prevalent traditions in post-Cold War American foreign policy thought. The “Trump doctrine”, as described above, marries a materialist understanding of power from realism with a civilizational agenda that harks back to the heyday of neoconservatism during George W. Bush’s presidency. These tenets are further undergirded by a transactionalist mindset, often simplistically associated with isolationism, which lends Trump’s policies an amoral, ahistorical and ad-hoc semblance.

This Trumpian brand of transactionalist realism with civilizational undertones has in-built problems that are tied to the materialist definition of power utilized by the administration, the ideational purpose underpinning the exercise of power, and the transactionalist mindset that informs the president’s decision-making on foreign policy. With a myopic focus on military strength and relative economic gains, the incumbent is ignoring the legitimacy-producing potential of soft power instruments and win-win scenarios. By stressing civilizational affinities and nationalist tropes, Trump risks further fomenting America’s internal divisions and the stratification of the international arena into the “civilized” and “uncivilized”. This is a recipe for creating inter-cultural antagonisms and further fragmenting the international order. When assessed in terms of prudence – a quintessential principle of classical realist students of the international arena – the administration’s attempt to brand Trump’s foreign policy as “principled realism” ultimately fails on both definitions that the term conjures up. The emerging “Trump doctrine” is principled *neither* in the sense of pertaining to American values, *nor* in terms of striving for consistent or coherent policy conduct.

In fact, by espousing the “Trump doctrine”, the president and his administration are effectively trying to “have their cake and eat it”. Trump has incessantly pledged to *both* put America First and Make America Great Again, but upon reflection these tropes actually appear irreconcilable. Insofar as greatness necessitates a level of recognition from others in the international system, it remains a social status variable. Achievement of greatness, then, requires taking into account

the interests and identities of other actors in the international arena. This does not fit well with pledging to look out for America’s narrow self-interests, espousing a world of competing state entities when the transnational arena is becoming increasingly salient, or trying to bundle US allies under a civilizational rubric that assumes a relatively uniform, exclusivist and narrow understanding of a collective (Western Judeo-Christian) identity.

Trump’s transactionalist and competition-inducing approach might bring short-term triumphs, such as renegotiating NAFTA, getting China to open up its markets to international competition or bringing North Korean dictator Kim Jong-un to the negotiating table. However, the long-term effects of such ad hocery and antagonistic posturing are likely to be abrasive for sustainable international cooperation. In fact, implementation of the “Trump doctrine” looks to erode the US ability to act as a driver and shaper of the international agenda. America’s allies are already pursuing constellations of cooperation that can be understood, at least in part, as hedging strategies – measures to brace for hardening competition, and offset the uncertainty that surrounds US international commitments.¹⁶³ This has been the case in the Asia-Pacific, where the TPP process is going ahead without US involvement,¹⁶⁴ but is also visible in the deepening of intra-European defence cooperation under EU auspices,¹⁶⁵ and the expedited negotiation of an EU-Japan Free Trade Agreement.¹⁶⁶ In this sense, if methodically implemented, the emerging “Trump doctrine” risks not only leaving the US out in the cold when it comes to these and other novel cooperative forays, but also has the potential to erode American credibility and trustworthiness in the eyes of its most important reference group, partners and allies. Trump or no Trump, the US will need the help of friends to achieve its strategic aims and sustain global leadership.

163 Keating and Ruzicka 2014, p. 761.

164 Government of Canada 2018.

165 EEAS 2018.

166 European Commission 2018.

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