



# **POLICY ROUNDTABLE: What to Make of Trump’s National Security Strategy**

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## 1. Introducing the 2017 National Security Strategy Roundtable

William Inboden

Every time an American president releases a new *National Security Strategy*, it provokes a round of commentary on the document itself as well as an additional round of hand-wringing over whether such strategy documents matter at all. The release earlier this week of President Donald Trump’s inaugural *National Security Strategy* was no exception. If anything, the commentary became even more intense because of the unusual and (it is both obligatory and hackneyed to say it) *unprecedented* nature of the Trump presidency. Concerning the question of whether these strategy documents bear any weight on the actual conduct of American national security policy and strategy, ultimately that will be a question for historians to decide in the fullness of time, when the archives are opened and assessments can be made of to what extent a strategy document shaped or even resembled the policies that were implemented. However, it bears noting that the extensive commentary and attention that each strategy receives — this one being no exception — indicates that the document matters at least enough for those who think and write about strategy for a living to pay it some heed.

So what to make of this new *National Security Strategy*? First, congratulations are due to National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster and his staff, especially Nadia Schadlow and Seth Center, for the intellectual energy and dispatch with which they developed and drafted this document and shepherded it through the interagency approval process. This is the first time since the *National Security Strategy* was mandated in 1986 by the Goldwater-Nichols Act that a new president has issued one in his first year in office.

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Given that many other strategy documents produced by the national security community — such as the *National Defense Strategy*, the *National Military Strategy*, the *Quadrennial Defense Review*, and so forth — take their cues from the *National Security Strategy*, the timing of its release also bodes well for the interagency process of strategy formulation.

As far as evaluating the content and themes of the 2017 *National Security Strategy*, we have assembled an expert cast of strategists and scholars who offer their takes from a range of disciplines, expertise, and ideological commitments. Writing from the vantage point of academic realism, Emma Ashford and Joshua Shiffrinson offer a sustained lament that the *National Security Strategy* is neither realist nor restrained but instead follows the same post-Cold War blueprint of past administrations in seeking to maintain American primacy in the international system. In their assessment, “At least on paper, Trump is little different than his predecessors.” Indeed, they contend that the president’s loudest critics who have fretted that the Trump administration is abandoning America’s historic role of leading the liberal international order should instead be relieved because “In many ways, Trump’s liberal international critics are getting almost everything they could want in this strategy.” And that, Ashford and Shiffrinson argue, is the real tragedy.

Andrew Hill also provides an expansive assessment of the strategy, though worries that it is beset by nostalgia. He draws on eclectic sources, such as Woody Allen’s *Midnight in Paris*, to ask whether the new strategy perhaps succumbs to too much wistfulness for a golden era in American strategy and political economy that never was. In contrast to these explorations of the large themes of the strategy, Ben Buchanan takes a focused look at how the strategy handles one particular issue: cyber-security. His question is evocative:

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Does the Trump administration recognize and address that, in cyberspace, America's adversaries are playing Calvinball\* (the famous game from the *Calvin and Hobbes* cartoon strip in which there are no rules)<sup>1</sup> while the United States is still playing a regimented and well-defined game of chess?

Yet Buchanan's answer is a dispirited "no," as he particularly finds the *National Security Strategy* wanting for failing to address Russia's sustained cyber-operations against the American electoral system.

Zach Cooper and Mira Rapp-Hooper also direct their analysis to one particular aspect of the *National Security Strategy*, in this case China. Here they detect what may in fact be a seismic shift in America's strategic posture when the strategy rejects the "responsible stakeholder" aspiration that had embodied the hopes of prior administrations that engagement with China would induce the Middle Kingdom to embrace the international system. While Cooper and Rapp-Hooper applaud this more accurate assessment of China's intentions, they also raise a series of questions and concerns about how the *National Security Strategy* and the Trump administration's actions thus far fail to translate this insight into the needful policies.

Another commentator who takes up the China question is Phil Levy, who does so from the perspective of international trade. His analysis probes what he sees as the sometime disconnects between the language of the strategy and the administration's actual practices. As he puts it,

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<sup>1</sup> Calvin and Hobbes, "Very Sorry," retrieved December 20, 2017,

<http://www.picpak.net/calvin/oldsite/images/verysorry.jpg>.

while the *National Security Strategy* paints a vision of working with allies and partners to confront China, Trump administration practice to date has been to work together with China while attacking allies and partners.

Carmen Medina channels the perspective of the intelligence community, befitting her own long distinguished career in intelligence analysis. She finds much in the basic worldview of the *National Security Strategy* that will appeal to the intelligence community, even as she worries whether American intelligence is properly organized and equipped for taking up the intelligence demands that the strategy implies in domains such as economics.

Offering a sailor's take, Bryan McGrath focuses on the role that seapower does, or should, play in the new strategy. He is pleased to see the strategy hit many of the right notes, but is disappointed that the role of seapower is underdiscussed, despite its centrality to a nation's ability to project force and influence:

A number of familiar campaign themes manifest themselves in the *National Security Strategy's* prescriptions for promoting prosperity (fair trade deals, improving infrastructure, and reducing regulatory burdens) without much consideration of that which provides for the movement of 90 percent of world trade: freedom of the seas underwritten by dominant American seapower.

Finally, from an airman's perspective, Lt. Gen. (ret.) David Deptula finds much to like, offering the praise that the *National Security Strategy* "contains the best of Ronald Reagan's strategy of peace through strength." He is pleased that it focuses on rebuilding America's military strength, which has not kept pace with competitors and potential

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adversaries like Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran. Drawing on Sen. John McCain, he notes that the military services are underfunded, undersized, and unready — most especially the U.S. Air Force, which “has the oldest weapon systems, is the smallest, and it is the least ready it has ever been *in its entire history*” [emphasis author’s]. Deptula hopes that the strategy’s principles will be translated into material increases in the defense budget. With this document, the Trump administration has offered its argument for what drives international politics in our era, what the main threats and opportunities facing our nation are, and for why an “America First” strategy will be best for the United States and, ultimately, the world. While our commentators have offered their best initial thoughts, the final assessment of the *National Security Strategy* will come not from the expert pens of our contributors but from the dedicated professionals who will implement it and from the hard knocks of the international arena itself.

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## 2. Trump's National Security Strategy: A Critics Dream

Emma Ashford and Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrin

President Donald Trump released his administration's first *National Security Strategy* on December 18, 2017 with much fanfare.<sup>2</sup> In the run-up to the release, Trump's foreign policy had come in for significant hostility, with critics decrying the administration for betraying U.S. liberal internationalism and pursuing an avowedly "America First" agenda.<sup>3</sup> Initial reactions to the speech from much of the policy and scholarly communities have been at best ambivalent, with analysts lambasting the strategy's "realist framing," its

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<sup>2</sup> The White House, *The National Security Strategy of the United States*, December, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>. For media coverage, see, e.g., CBS News, "Trump Outlines New National Security Strategy," December 18, 2017, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/live-trump-delivers-national-security-strategy-speech-live-stream/>.

<sup>3</sup> For representative discussions, see David Frum, "A National-Security Strategy Devoid of Values," *The Atlantic*, December 12, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/12/a-national-security-strategy-devoid-of-values/548219/>; James Jay Carafano, "What Should Trump's National Security Strategy Look Like?" *The National Interest*, December 10, 2017, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/what-should-trumps-national-security-strategy-look-23585>; Thomas Wright, "What Would An Honest National Security Strategy Say," *War on the Rocks*, December 12, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/12/honest-national-security-strategy-say/>; Steven Metz, "Linking Trump's National Security Strategy to Reagan is a Roll of the Dice," *World Politics Review*, December 8, 2017, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/23784/linking-trump-s-national-security-strategy-to-reagan-is-a-roll-of-the-dice>; Kate Brannen, "Trump's National Security Strategy is Decidedly Non-Trumpian," *The Atlantic*, December 8, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/12/trump-nss-diplomacy-security-foreign-policy/547937/>.



emphasis on great power competition, and seeming over-reliance on the military tools of statecraft.<sup>4</sup>

These assessments are disingenuous. Like it or not, the 2017 *National Security Strategy* is strongly in line with the national security agendas of Presidents Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama. The new strategy may spend time identifying the problematic and self-harming elements of America's post-Cold War foreign policy consensus, but it is neither realist in its logic nor restrained in its recommendations. Instead, it commits the United States to a more muscular primacist agenda. Trump's one-time critics should now rejoice: at least on core security issues, the document reflects Trump's formal agreement to sustain the U.S. strategic consensus. They have won the initial salvo in the grand strategy debate of this administration.

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<sup>4</sup> Paul Pillar, "America Alone," *The National Interest*, December 19, 2017, <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/paul-pillar/america-alone-23726>; Andrew E. Kramer, "Russia and China Object to New 'America First' Security Doctrine," *New York Times*, December 19, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/19/world/europe/russia-china-america-first-doctrine.html>; Daniel Twining, "Does Trump's National Security Strategy Have a Value's Deficit?" *Foreign Policy*, December 19, 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/12/18/trumps-national-security-strategy-has-a-values-deficit/>; Roger Cohen, "Trump's National Security Strategy is a Farce," *New York Times*, December 19, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/19/opinion/trump-national-security-strategy-tillerson-haley.html>; Editorial, "Trump's National Security Strategy Isn't Much of a Strategy at All," *Washington Post*, December 19, 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/trumps-national-security-strategy-isnt-much-of-a-strategy-at-all/2017/12/19/eac50556-e4e9-11e7-ab50-621fe0588340\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.af589929bd37](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/trumps-national-security-strategy-isnt-much-of-a-strategy-at-all/2017/12/19/eac50556-e4e9-11e7-ab50-621fe0588340_story.html?utm_term=.af589929bd37).

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## The 2017 Strategy: Sui Generis or Déjà vu All Over Again?

Grand strategy — the linkage of a state’s military, diplomatic, and economic tools of statecraft to help a state “produce” security for itself — is notoriously difficult to formulate, describe, and execute.<sup>5</sup> Although often portrayed as a formal plan by which a state assesses its interests and the means it chooses to get there, in reality, strategy evolves as external conditions, domestic and bureaucratic politics, and the ideas motivating individual policymakers wax and wane.<sup>6</sup> The relative importance of these factors can vary as well. States living in highly competitive international environments (think 19th century Europe) are incentivized to focus on external conditions. In contrast, states benefiting from a surfeit of security have the latitude to draw more heavily upon other factors.

The modern United States falls into the latter category: a massively wealthy state surrounded by weak neighbors, wide oceans, and with no peer competitor since the early 1990s, the United States benefits from the most latent security of any actor in modern history. In the post-Cold War world, the net result has been the consolidation of a powerful grand strategic consensus in which the United States claims to act in support of a liberal world order. In theory, this system allows the United States to (1) support

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<sup>5</sup> Barry R. Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany Between the World Wars* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), 3–6; Hal Brands, *What Good Is Grand Strategy?: Power and Purpose in American Statecraft from Harry S. Truman to George W. Bush* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> For the critique of grand strategy as a formal plan, see Ionut Popescu, “Grand Strategy is Overrated,” *Foreign Policy*, December 11, 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/12/11/grand-strategy-is-overrated-trump-national-security-strategy-nss/>.

benevolent policies such as free-trade and regional stability; (2) prevent states from engaging in military affairs unless viewed as legitimate; and (3) integrate potential rivals into a mutually agreed-upon “rules based” system of international governance.<sup>7</sup>

Of course, these claims were always embraced more in theory than in the breach. In practice, the United States quickly recognized the desirability of asserting American power in support of its self-defined interests irrespective of other states’ concerns. “America First” is hardly a new concept. Primacy, not benign liberal engagement, typically ruled the day. After all, the United States went to war against both Serbia and Iraq despite international opposition, and has shown a marked disinclination to let other states have a say in constructing the nominal “rules” of international governance.

As a framing device, however, the post-Cold War foreign policy consensus was a mobilization device par excellence, reflecting and able to sustain popular backing through its nod to liberal values, bureaucratic support by providing substantial foreign policy funding, and political support by leaving enough maneuvering room for leaders to pursue any policy they wanted. Indeed, the appeal of this consensus was such that — as Patrick Porter shows — alternate grand strategy approaches have been largely ignored, with their proponents isolated or driven from government decision-making.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> For such discussions, see G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order After Major Wars* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); G. John Ikenberry and Anne-Marie Slaughter, eds., *Forging a World of Liberty Under Law: U.S. National Security in the 21st Century: Final Report of the Princeton Project on National Security* (Princeton: Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, Princeton University, 2006).

<sup>8</sup> Patrick Porter, “Why America’s Grand Strategy Has Not Changed: Power, Habit and the Foreign Policy Establishment,” *International Security* (forthcoming).

Despite the sound of grinding teeth, Trump's *National Security Strategy* fits squarely in the post-Cold War grand strategic tradition. This is not to deny that the 2017 strategy contains some departures from past practice on domestic policies, with calls for reduced immigration, tightened border security, and economic policies suggesting more closed American homeland. Still, on core security issues related to U.S. engagement in international affairs, relations with other powerful states, and counter-terrorism and state-building efforts, Trump's agenda is in keeping with the post-Cold War tradition.

Consider 2017. Despite coming to office more overtly critical of U.S. global activism and traditional alliance relations than any American leader since 1945, Trump's first year in office has seen Washington double-down on its commitments in the Middle East, affirm the American commitment to NATO, and reinforce the U.S.-Japanese and U.S.-South Korean relationship. The new strategy affirms these actions, noting that the United States will "compete and lead in multilateral organizations so that American interests and principles are protected." It underscores the continued relevance of NATO, existing "partnerships" in the Middle East, and the centrality of allies in East Asia for "responding to mutual threats."<sup>9</sup> In this, the document parallels past strategic declarations. The George W. Bush administration's 2006 strategy, for instance, vowed that the United States would prioritize "pursuing American interests within cooperative relationships, particularly with our oldest and closest friends and allies." Likewise, the Obama administration's 2015 strategy called for the U.S. to foster a "rules-based international order" under "U.S. leadership that promotes peace, security, and opportunity through

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<sup>9</sup> *National Security Strategy* 2017, 4, 40, 46-49.

stronger cooperation to meet global challenges.”<sup>10</sup> The Trump administration has effectively committed itself to a strikingly similar approach, couched in similar language, to its predecessors.

The same is true of U.S. relations with other powerful states such as India, Russia, and China. At the start of the 1990s, the U.S. government — as the draft 1992 *Defense Planning Guidelines* and its successors underscored — decided that it would oppose the emergence of peer competitors able to challenge American dominance.<sup>11</sup> As the distribution of power shifted away from the United States, this view evolved. The United States would now seek to either coopt potential competitors as allies (e.g., India) or incentivize their continued cooperation through integration into economic and security institutions. The tradeoff gradually became explicit: as the 2015 *National Security Strategy* explained in the context of China, the United States would otherwise “manage competition from a position of strength.”<sup>12</sup> In short, America would welcome cooperation from other major powers on American terms, or try to overmatch potential competitors.

The 2017 strategy again falls within this post-Cold War tradition. Embracing the potential for U.S.-Indian “strategic partnership”, the report also notes that China and Russia are increasingly pursuing “revisionist” policies that imperil American dominance in Asia and

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<sup>10</sup> The White House, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, March 2006, 35, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/64884.pdf>; The White House, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, February 2015, 2, [https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2015\\_national\\_security\\_strategy\\_2.pdf](https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2015_national_security_strategy_2.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> Eric S. Edelman, “The Strange Career of the 1992 Defense Planning Guidance,” in *In Uncertain Times: American Foreign Policy After the Berlin Wall and 9/11*, ed. Melvyn P. Leffler and Jeffrey Legro (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), 63–77.

<sup>12</sup> *National Security Strategy* 2015, 24. See also *National Security Strategy* 2006, 40–42.

Europe.<sup>13</sup> The two “competitors” to the United States thus need to be overmatched and contained. Even here, however, the change is less dramatic than it may appear. Although describing China and Russia as explicit “competitors” is new, the underlying theme of competition is not. After all, as far back as the 2006 *National Security Strategy*, the George W. Bush administration allowed in the Chinese context that “Our strategy seeks to encourage China to make the right strategic choices for its people, *while we hedge against other possibilities* [emphasis added].” The Obama administration’s 2015 report was even clearer in underscoring “there will be competition” with China such that the United States sought to “manage competition from a position of strength.” Labeling China and Russia “competitors” is thus an evolutionary change in U.S. policy – not a revolutionary break.<sup>14</sup>

What of counter-terrorism and state building? The Trump-endorsed document hardly breaks the mold, committing the United States to both extensive counter-terrorism efforts — particularly against Islamist terrorism — and state-building abroad. Not only will the United States “pursue [terrorist] threats to their source” militarily, but there is a direct relationship between state-building and counter-terrorism. After all, “safe havens” in fragile states allow terrorist groups to flourish, requiring the U.S. to help develop local institutions so that direct American action is superfluous.<sup>15</sup> Again, this logic tracks with prior strategic guidance. Bush’s 2002 strategy, for one, espoused “direct and continuous action” against terrorist groups while calling upon the international community to “focus

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<sup>13</sup> *National Security Strategy* 2006, 42; *National Security Strategy* 2015, 24.

<sup>14</sup> *National Security Strategy* 2017, 27.

<sup>15</sup> *National Security Strategy* 2017, 39.

its efforts and resources on areas most at risk” of “spawning” terrorism.<sup>16</sup> Strikingly, not only did the 2006 *National Security Strategy* return to these themes, but so too did the 2015 version advanced by the Obama administration.<sup>17</sup> At least on paper, Trump is little different than his predecessors.

## A Critic’s Dream

Noting that the Trump administration’s *National Security Strategy* is relatively consistent with that of previous administrations is one thing. As significant for the grand strategy debate, it also bears little resemblance to the images conjured by the primacists who have become some of Trump’s biggest critics. Take Tom Wright’s campaign-era overview of Donald Trump’s foreign policy, in which he argues that Trump’s election would destroy America’s post-Cold War foreign policy:

If he did get elected president, he would do his utmost to liquidate the U.S.-led liberal order by ending America’s alliances, closing the open global economy, and cutting deals with Russia and China.<sup>18</sup>

Or, consider Elliot Cohen, who promises that Trump will usher in a “dangerous and dispiriting chapter” for American foreign policy. Cohen notes

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<sup>16</sup> The White House, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, September 2002, 6, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/nsc/nss/2002/>.

<sup>17</sup> *National Security Strategy* 2006, 8-10; *National Security Strategy* 2015, 9-10.

<sup>18</sup> Thomas Wright, “Trump’s 19<sup>th</sup> Century Foreign Policy,” *Politico*, January 20, 2016, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/01/donald-trump-foreign-policy-213546?o=2>.

even barring cataclysmic events, we will be living with the consequences of Trump's tenure as chief executive and commander in chief for decades. Damage will continue to appear long after he departs the scene.<sup>19</sup>

Meanwhile, Hal Brands outlines a stark potential shift in American foreign policy, a so-called "Fortress America" approach "that would actively roll back the post-war international order and feature heavy doses of unilateralism and latter-day isolationism."<sup>20</sup>

Yet the Trump administration has not gone down this road, in either practice or the new *National Security Strategy*. Again, the document embraces America's global alliances, noting that "allies and partners are a great strength of the United States," and promising to "encourage aspiring partners."<sup>21</sup> In contrast to the idea of embracing authoritarian states, it pushes back on them strongly through repeated statements such as "China and Russia want to shape a world antithetical to U.S. values and interests." Indeed, the language in the document is so stark on this point that Russia and China have condemned it as "imperial" and a "victory for hardliners."<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Elliot Cohen, "Trump is Ending the American Era," *The Atlantic*, October 2017,

<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/10/is-trump-ending-the-american-era/537888>.

<sup>20</sup> Hal Brands, "US Grand Strategy in an Age of Nationalism: Fortress America and its Alternatives," *Washington Quarterly* (Spring 2017): 74.

<sup>21</sup> *National Security Strategy* 2017, 37-38.

<sup>22</sup> "China Reacts to Trump's National Security Strategy." *CBS News*, December 19, 2017,

[https://www.cbsnews.com/news/donald-trump-china-national-security-strategy-victory-hardliners-us-](https://www.cbsnews.com/news/donald-trump-china-national-security-strategy-victory-hardliners-us-isolationism/)

[isolationism/](https://www.cbsnews.com/news/donald-trump-china-national-security-strategy-victory-hardliners-us-isolationism/); "Russia blasts Trump's "imperial" national security strategy," *CBS News*, December 19, 2017,

<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/russia-donald-trump-imperial-national-security-strategy/>.



Even on trade, where the document perhaps makes the biggest divergence from prior policy approaches, it doesn't come close to the dystopian visions critics have predicted. The document strongly supports the existing global trade regime, though it does promise to crack down on "cheating" countries which "adhere selectively to the rules and agreements" of free trade.<sup>23</sup> Though the document suggests the potential to "modernize" existing trade agreements, it offers no specifics, instead emphasizing domestic economic policies such as infrastructure investment. By any reasonable standard, this is a change of degree, not of type.

Yet, just as the *National Security Strategy* does not actually reflect the predictions of Trump's critics, neither does it appear to be realist in any true sense of the word. Certainly, the document claims to advance a strategy of "principled realism," suggesting aspirations for the level-headed strategic calculations of a Henry Kissinger or George H.W. Bush. Yet realism as a concept has always been promiscuously used by experts in order to give their opinion gravitas — or as a slur. As Kissinger himself once noted, "the United States is probably the only country in which "realist" can be used as a pejorative epithet."<sup>24</sup> Look no further than reactions to Donald Trump's foreign policy statements during the campaign. In response to articles attempting to label Trump's nationalist pronouncements as realist, both Stephen Walt and Robert Kaplan — analysts not known for their agreement on any issue — argued the same thing. In essence, each said, "I'm a realist, and Trump doesn't represent my foreign policy views."

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<sup>23</sup> *National Security Strategy* 2017, 17.

<sup>24</sup> Henry Kissinger, "Implementing Bush's Vision," *Washington Post*, May 16, 2005, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/05/15/AR2005051500811.html>.

Despite its use of the term, however, the new *National Security Strategy* includes few policies that are recognizably realist as understood by scholars or savvy practitioners. Although it promises pragmatism, the strategy commits pledges to advance American values and deny “the benefits of our free and prosperous community to repressive regimes and human rights abusers.”<sup>25</sup> It provides prominent placement to relatively minor threats like terrorism and transnational crime, and maintains America’s commitments to conflicts in Afghanistan and elsewhere despite criticism of those conflicts as expensive side-shows by most realist analysts. And it again perpetuates the idea of safe havens, arguing that fragile states pose security threats — a claim that most realists see as a myth.

In some ways, the document’s evocation of realism is reminiscent of an argument made recently in *Commentary* by some of Trump’s most fervent critics, Peter Feaver and Hal Brands. In arguing that realism has lost its way (and that Trump himself advocates a variant of a realist position ), the authors suggest that the solution is to ‘reclaim’ realism. They would do this by taking realism’s core precepts and adding those of liberal internationalism — from the necessity of American global leadership to maintaining U.S. alliances and spreading of American values.<sup>26</sup> In the same way as this approach seeks to appropriate the term realism and reallocate it to the authors’ favored policy packages, the Trump administration’s *National Security Strategy* uses the term “principled realism” to disguise its hodge-podge of contradictory ideas and impulses.

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<sup>25</sup> *National Security Strategy* 2017, 42.

<sup>26</sup> Hal Brands and Peter Feaver, “Saving Realism from the So-Called Realists,” *Commentary*, August 14, 2017, <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/saving-realism-called-realists/>.

Indeed, perhaps ironically, the document bears the strongest resemblance to the approaches favored by some of Trump’s critics. After criticizing “Fortress America,” for example, Brands go on to suggest an alternative, which he describes as a either “better nationalism” or “internationalism with a nationalist accent.”<sup>27</sup> This alternative includes a tougher approach to China, renegotiation of existing trade agreements like NAFTA, reaffirmed alliance commitments, a strong military buildup and intensified anti-terror campaigns — each of which is in the new *National Security Strategy*.

Likewise, Wright argues that his proposed grand strategy of “responsible competition” is not compatible with the Trump administration’s views.<sup>28</sup> Yet responsible competition is a strategy which “preserves a liberal international order” while acknowledging “the adversarial and zero-sum nature characterizing relations with rival powers,” and avoiding major conflict. This sounds remarkably similar to the *National Security Strategy*’s emphasis on combating powers like China and Russia, adversaries “adept at operating below the threshold of open military conflict.” Elsewhere, Wright emphasizes the nuclear threat posed by North Korea, and the need for increased military involvement in the Middle East — both of which are championed by the Trump administration. Undoubtedly, there are differences between these strategies, but there is more that unites them than divides them.

This common ground between Trump and his critics also suggests a more worrying trend: that members of the foreign policy consensus and backers of the Trump administration

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<sup>27</sup> Brands, “Strategy in an Age of Nationalism”: 83. See also Hal Brands, *American Grand Strategy in the Age of Trump* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2017).

<sup>28</sup> Thomas Wright, *All Measures Short of War: The Contest for the Twenty-First Century and the Future of American Power* (Yale University Press, 2017), 227.

may make common cause to sustain the primacist core of U.S. grand strategy at a time Americans are clamoring for a forthright foreign policy debate. As Brands argues, perhaps policymakers should make “an effort to minimize the most costly and frustrating aspects of American internationalism in order to sustain the broader tradition” of intensive American global engagement and efforts to structure international security on American terms. The *National Security Strategy* appears comfortable with a similar course, questioning long-running economic policy while advocating a muscular and unilateral approach to U.S. primacy. In many ways, Trump’s liberal international critics are getting almost everything they could want in this strategy.

### **Is There Hope for a Realist Grand Strategy?**

Of course, it is fair to question whether the *National Security Strategy* reflects Donald Trump’s own views, and whether it will be put into practice. Tellingly, the President’s speech accompanying the release of the *National Security Strategy* was notably different from the text. He spent much of his time criticizing his predecessors and calling for increased spending by NATO allies; he did not echo the document’s criticisms of China or Russia.<sup>29</sup> Yet in its broad strokes, the strategy mirrors the actions that the Trump administration has taken during its first year: complain about allies, suggest cozying up to Russia or China, and criticize America’s wars in the Middle East, while actually pursuing a conventional foreign policy and dialing up America’s foreign commitments. Trump’s

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<sup>29</sup> “Remarks by President Trump on the Administration’s National Security Strategy,” White House (website), December 18, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-administrations-national-security-strategy/>.

rhetoric has never truly matched his actions.<sup>30</sup> And, *regardless of the rhetoric*, the president has accepted this strategy and put his name on it. If this is a case of advisors like Secretary of Defense James Mattis or National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster “managing up,” then they have been remarkably successful in reshaping the president’s foreign policy instincts, and maintaining the broad strokes of American primacy as a strategy.

Yet, if Trump and his advisers have sought the realist imprimatur without actually embracing realist precepts, the question stands: what would a realist national security strategy entail? It is *not* primacy: as even the most hard-bitten realists focused on power-seeking acknowledge, pursuing primacy in global affairs is a recipe for international opposition and overreach.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, realism as a body of knowledge underscores the often self-defeating nature of power and the risks of actively seeking security in an uncertain world.

Any realist strategy would therefore start from the point noted earlier in this paper, namely, that the United States is extremely secure. From there, the question becomes: how does seeking more power and more security in the world help, and what are we giving up or squandering in the process? For many realists, the answer is simple: a restrained grand strategy focused largely on preventing a peer competitor such as China from establishing dominance overseas, while reinforcing quiet tools of cooperation with local actors to address regional conflicts, terrorism, and other such security problems.

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<sup>30</sup> For illustration, see Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shifrinson, “Trump and NATO: Old Wine in Gold Bottles?” *H-Diplo/ISSF Policy Series*, September 29, 2017, <https://issforum.org/roundtables/policy/1-5ba-nato>.

<sup>31</sup> For the most forthright argument, see the conclusion to John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001).

Without locally powerful actors poised to dominate their regions, and with actors incentivized to address local problems in way conducive to U.S. interests, the United States can be far more relaxed in world affairs. Restraint — as opposed to the classic formulation of primacy or the Frankenstein version of it found in the new strategy — has much to commend it.

Still, not all analysts accept that the global status quo is truly stable. Some argue that local conflicts might spin out of control; that local competitions may allow a state such as China or Russia to establish regional hegemony; or that local actors may fail to address problems such as terrorism. These are reasonable concerns. Even then, however, a truly realist grand strategy would still ask the extent to which American activism is needed to address these problems. Depending on the circumstance, some form of American action may be needed, whether combat power, diplomacy, or economic engagement.

Nevertheless, it would not mandate the extensive efforts to manage all global affairs at significant cost and risk that the post-Cold War consensus calls for and the Trump administration endorses.

Advocates of the foreign policy consensus have been rightly critical of many aspects of the Trump administration, from his odious and xenophobic views of immigrants to his tendency to pick fights on twitter. Trump himself is a poor spokesperson for U.S. foreign policy: his impulsiveness and self-absorption are likely to undermine foreign policy implementation throughout his term in office. Yet their criticisms of Trump's foreign policy are misleading. The new *National Security Strategy* is far closer to the primacy-based strategy favored by these critics than to any recognizably realist strategy. Both Trump and his critics call for the United States to play an outsize role in global affairs because they see the world as dangerous, and believe American activism increases our

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power and influence. Ultimately, Trump's critics should be thrilled. They are getting almost everything they want.

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### 3. Nostalgia and Strategy: There Never Was a Golden Age

Andrew Hill

The desire to restore bygone glories is understandable, and such nostalgia pervades President Donald Trump's first *National Security Strategy*.<sup>32</sup> The introduction frames the strategy as a way to restore an American Golden Age, presenting a historical overview of America's rise to a golden age of power in the 20th century, and its decline since the 1990s. Thus, after the glory of a Cold War victory, the document informs us, "the United States began to drift. We experienced a crisis of confidence and surrendered our advantages in key areas." The effects of this nostalgic framing are most evident in chapters on American economic (Pillar II) and military (Pillar III) power, which present plans to "rejuvenate" the economy and "rebuild" the military. Indeed, the entire *National Security Strategy* seems to pivot on the prefix "re-": renew, rebuild, restore, recover, regain, revitalize, reverse, reestablish, rejuvenate, reemerge, recommit, etc. For a strategy that claims to provide "fresh thinking" about strategy, it is oddly rooted in the past.

The trouble with such nostalgia is that it hinders understanding of present conditions, and limits strategic vision and creativity as we consider the future. If our sense of the future is bounded by our incorrect understanding of the past, we will fail to recognize the novel opportunities of the present. Nostalgia relies on a false sense of history, and it encourages an inaccurate view of the present, both of which are bad for strategy (especially the latter). An obsession with a glory that never was can blind us to the great possibilities that truly are.

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<sup>32</sup> The White House, *The National Security Strategy of the United States*, December, 2017,

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.



In Woody Allen’s *Midnight in Paris*,<sup>33</sup> Gil, an unhappy modern American writer, finds himself transported back to the 1920s Paris of his dreams — inhabited by the legendary artists and writers of Hemingway’s moveable feast.<sup>34,35</sup> While there, Gil falls for Adriana, an aspiring fashion designer whose own city of dreams is the Paris of *la belle époque*.<sup>36</sup> Sure enough, one night the two magically find themselves in the 1890s Paris of the *Moulin Rouge*, gaslights, and Gauguin, where Gil has an epiphany:

*Gil:* I was trying to escape my present the same way you’re trying to escape yours: to a golden age.

*Adriana:* Surely you don’t think the twenties are a golden age?

*Gil:* Yeah, to me they are.

*Adriana:* But I’m from the twenties and I’m telling you the golden age is *la belle époque*.

*Gil:* I mean, and look at these guys. To them, their golden age is the renaissance. You know, they’d rather... they’d trade *belle époque* to be painting alongside Titian and Michelangelo. And those guys probably imagine life was a lot better when Kublai Khan was around... I’m having an

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<sup>33</sup> *Midnight in Paris*, directed by Woody Allen (Culver City, CA: Sony Pictures, 2011), DVD.

<sup>34</sup> Stephen Cleary, “Writers in Paris,” *British Library*, May 25, 2016, <https://www.bl.uk/20th-century-literature/articles/writers-in-paris>.

<sup>35</sup> Charles Poore, “Ernest Hemingway’s Memoir of Paris in the Twenties,” *New York Times*, May 5, 1964, <http://www.nytimes.com/books/99/07/04/specials/hemingway-feast.html>.

<sup>36</sup> Kim Willsher, “Monet, Cabaret and Absinthe: Paris Years for ‘la Belle Époque,’” *The Guardian*, February 15, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/feb/15/paris-1900-belle-epoque-exhibition-petit-palais>

insight now... it's a minor one, but it explains the anxiety in my dream that I had.

*Adriana:* What dream?

*Gil:* I had a dream the other night where, it was like a nightmare, where I ran out of Zithromax, and I went to see the dentist, and he didn't have any Novocain. You see what I'm saying? These people don't have any antibiotics.

*Adriana:* What are you talking about?

*Gil:* Adriana, if you stay here, and this becomes your present, then pretty soon, you'll start imagining another time was really your golden time. You know, that's what the present is. It's a little unsatisfying because life's a little unsatisfying.

The longing for past glory is a persistent force in human history. For Romans of the Augustan era, the golden age was the early republic.<sup>37</sup> For those of the later times, Rome's golden age was the flowering of Roman culture during the late Republic and the reign of Augustus,<sup>38</sup> or the reign of the good emperors, from Nerva to Marcus Aurelius, during the second century (the "most happy and prosperous" period in human history, according to Edward Gibbon).<sup>39</sup> 1500 years after the fall of the Western Roman Empire, the Italian

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<sup>37</sup> Livy, *History of Rome*, book 1, trans. Rev. Canon Roberts (New York City, NY: E. P. Dutton and Co., 1912), <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0026>.

<sup>38</sup> *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, s.v. "Latin Literature," accessed December 20, 2017, <https://www.britannica.com/art/Latin-literature - ref244285>.

<sup>39</sup> Edward Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, vol. 1, 1776, retrieved December 20, 2017, <http://www.sacred-texts.com/cla/gibbon/01/dafo1o12.htm>.

fascists traded on the Roman past by adopting a roman imperial greeting as their salute.<sup>40</sup> Nostalgia for past glory or past simplicity seemed a significant factor in Britain's vote to exit the European Union.<sup>41</sup> And then we have American nostalgia: Tom Brokaw's *Greatest Generation*<sup>42</sup> or the "Make America Great Again" slogan purveyed during Trump's successful presidential campaign.

Golden ages can be useful concepts. Certainly, there are moments when the thought of a better time can encourage and motivate people amidst terrible adversity. The thought of a golden past becomes the basis of hope for a better future. Sometimes, things really are bad, and we need to hang on to the idea that a better world, now lost to us, can be restored. But a fixation on the hazy glories of the past can also prevent leaders from recognizing the real opportunities of the present. Not only that, but the nostalgic versions of the past that we hold in our minds tend to omit crucial realities of those times. Barbara Tuchman captured this tendency in her description of the longing for pre-World War I Europe, writing in *the Proud Tower*:

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<sup>40</sup> Deutsche Welle, "Italy's Parliament Votes to Outlaw Fascist Symbols, Roman Salute," September 13, 2017, <http://www.dw.com/en/italys-parliament-votes-to-outlaw-fascist-symbols-roman-salute/a-40486690>.

<sup>41</sup> Michael Enright, "Is the Brexit vote Nostalgia for the Bygone Glories of the British Empire?" CBC Radio, June 26, 2016, <http://www.cbc.ca/radio/thesundayedition/who-s-voting-trump-nostalgia-for-britannia-ad-blockers-are-killing-the-internet-the-poet-who-hates-poetry-1.3649955/is-the-brexit-vote-nostalgia-for-the-bygone-glories-of-the-british-empire-1.3649960>; Samuel Earle, "The Toxic Nostalgia of Brexit," *The Atlantic*, October 5, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/10/brexit-britain-may-johnson-eu/542079/>; Gideon Rachman, "Brexit Reinforces Britain's Imperial Amnesia," *Financial Times*, May 27, 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/e3e32b38-ofc8-11e7-a88c-50ba212dce4d>; Lord Ashcroft, "How the United Kingdom Voted on Thursday...and Why," *Lord Ashcroft Polls*, June 24, 2016, <http://lordashcroftpolls.com/2016/06/how-the-united-kingdom-voted-and-why/>;

<sup>42</sup> Tom Brokaw, *The Greatest Generation*, (New York City, NY: Random House, 1998).

The period was not a Golden Age or Belle Epoque except to a thin crust of the privileged class. It was not a time exclusively of confidence, innocence, comfort, stability, security and peace... Our misconception lies in assuming that doubt and fear, ferment, protest, violence and hate were not equally present. We have been misled by the people of the time themselves who, in looking back across the gulf of the War, see that earlier half of their lives misted over by a lovely sunset haze of peace and security. It did not seem so golden when they were in the midst of it.<sup>43</sup>

In truth, there never was a golden age. The best and worst of humanity are always with us. Life is always hard, and, as Gil observed, “a little unsatisfying.” But in historical terms, how hard is life right now for the United States? If we were to construct a sort of opportunity-loss scale for the United States on the basis of threats and strengths, what is the nation’s position relative to its past?

We seem to have forgotten that America’s post-World War II ascendance as a global power occurred during a time of great power competition, when the United States faced, in the Soviet Union, an adversary that was implacably hostile, militarily more powerful (at least conventionally), and the central actor in a parallel global economic system. The Soviet Union was scary.<sup>44</sup> The United States fought costly wars against communism in

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<sup>43</sup> Barbara Tuchman, *The Proud Tower: A Portrait of the World Before the war, 1890-1914* (New York City, NY: Random House, 1996).

<sup>44</sup> Mike Rowe, “The Most,” *The History Channel*, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MmoyQg1hS\\_w&feature=youtu.be](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MmoyQg1hS_w&feature=youtu.be); *Duck and Cover*, U.S. Federal Civil Defense Administration, 1951, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BFT8hLjHtuE&feature=youtu.be>.

Korea and Vietnam, and the two superpowers came close to nuclear conflict. During the 1970s and early 1980s, Americans felt uncertain about American power and its place in the world,<sup>45</sup> epitomized by President Jimmy Carter’s “malaise speech.”<sup>46</sup> Given the choice between dealing with the Soviet Union of 1970 and the Russia and China of 2017, American political and military leaders (past or present) would probably take 2017 every time. That does not mean that 2017 is safe in some absolute sense. It is not. No time is. That is the point.

The *National Security Strategy* discusses at length the challenges posed by a rising China, the strongest current competitor to the United States. China warrants our attention, yet China itself faces tremendous strategic challenges. China has deeply problematic demographics, including a wildly imbalanced gender ratio and the burden of becoming old before it becomes rich.<sup>47</sup> China’s relationship with Japan is complicated,<sup>48</sup> and other

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<sup>45</sup> “Public Uncertain, Divided Over America’s Place in the World,” Pew Research Center, May 5, 2016, <http://www.people-press.org/2016/05/05/8-perceptions-of-u-s-global-power-and-respect/>.

<sup>46</sup> Jimmy Carter, “Address to the Nation on Energy and National Goals: ‘The Malaise Speech,’” July 15, 1979, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=32596>.

<sup>47</sup> *The Economist*, “A Distorted Sex Ratio Is Playing Havoc with Marriage in China,” November 23, 2017, <https://www.economist.com/news/special-report/21731495-shortage-brides-bending-chinese-society-out-shape-distorted-sex-ratio>; Alex Gray, “China Will Grow Old Before It Gets Rich,” World Economic Forum, October 6, 2017, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2017/10/china-will-grow-old-before-it-gets-rich/>

<sup>48</sup> *The Economist*, “The Future of Sino-Japanese Relations,” September 9, 2017, <https://www.economist.com/news/books-and-arts/21728605-asias-reckoning-analyses-long-standing-regional-rivalry-future-sino-japanese>.

neighbors are not entirely aligned with China's goals.<sup>49</sup> Notably, China shares a tense border with India, the world's largest democracy and itself a rising world power.<sup>50</sup>

Russia remains dangerous. Though a shell of its former self, it still has a large number of nuclear weapons and a tendency to provoke the United States.<sup>51</sup> Modern Russians are nostalgic for the post-World War II Soviet Union,<sup>52</sup> a sentiment that President Vladimir Putin both cultivates and exploits to retain an outsize vision of Russia's importance in the world.<sup>53</sup> Russia has understandable concerns about its borders due to the strength of NATO. It has its own domestic problems, including a stagnant economy and an aging population, both of which may increase the risk of Russia lashing out against its neighbors.

There are plenty of things to keep today's leaders awake at night. Nuisances like Iran, North Korea, and terrorism are always with us. The present features its own novel

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<sup>49</sup> Chris Horton, "Southeast Asia's Dance with China," *New York Times*, May 26, 2016,

[https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/26/international-home/southeast-asias-dance-with-china.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/26/international-home/southeast-asias-dance-with-china.html?_r=0).

<sup>50</sup> Steve George and Anish Gawande, "China Holds Live Fire Drills, as Border Dispute with India Enters Fifth Week," CNN, August 25, 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2017/07/19/asia/india-china-border-standoff/index.html>.

<sup>51</sup> "Nuclear Weapons: Who Has What at a Glance," Arms Control Association, October 3, 2017,

<https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/Nuclearweaponswhohaswhat>.

<sup>52</sup> "In Russia, Nostalgia for Soviet Union and Positive Feelings About Stalin," Pew Research Center, June 29, 2017, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/06/29/in-russia-nostalgia-for-soviet-union-and-positive-feelings-about-stalin/>.

<sup>53</sup> Alec Luhn, "Stalin, Russia's New Hero," *New York Times*, March 11, 2016,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/13/opinion/sunday/stalinist-nostalgia-in-vladimir-putins-russia.html>;

Timothy Snyder, "Putin's New Nostalgia," *New York Review of Books*, November 10, 2014,

<http://www.nybooks.com/daily/2014/11/10/putin-nostalgia-stalin-hitler/>.

problems, such as the disruptive consequences of a warming climate (intentionally dismissed from strategic conversations in this administration and omitted from the *National Security Strategy*),<sup>54</sup> cyber volatility, the development and proliferation of artificial intelligence,<sup>55</sup> and challenges to state power in areas such as the international flows of financial assets.<sup>56</sup> Yet, should we believe that the right way to deal with all of this is to “rebuild” ourselves based on an inaccurate assessment of our current condition, in some image of a past that never really existed?

Trump’s *National Security Strategy* falls woefully short in its consideration of the power and the privileged position that the United States already possesses, and how that can be used to advance American security. The U.S. constitution is a model for the world,<sup>57</sup> and its guarantees of freedom remain a source of inspiration and power. Among developed nations, the United States remains relatively young, with a decent birthrate (for a

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<sup>54</sup> The White House, *The National Security Implications of a Changing Climate*, May 2015, [https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/docs/National\\_Security\\_Implications\\_of\\_Changing\\_Climate\\_Final\\_051915.pdf](https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/docs/National_Security_Implications_of_Changing_Climate_Final_051915.pdf).

<sup>55</sup> Stuart Russell, “Letter to the Members of the Defense Innovation Board,” September 28, 2016, retrieved December 20, 2017, <https://people.eecs.berkeley.edu/~russell/research/LAWS/autonomous-weapons-letter-DIB16.pdf>; Maureen Dowd, “Elon Musk’s Billion-Dollar Crusade to Stop the A.I. Apocalypse,” *Vanity Fair*, March 26, 2017, <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2017/03/elon-musk-billion-dollar-crusade-to-stop-ai-space-x>.

<sup>56</sup> Derek Thompson, “Bitcoin Is a Delusion that Could Conquer the World,” *The Atlantic*, November 30, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2017/11/bitcoin-delusion-conquer-world/547187/>.

<sup>57</sup> Rod Rosenstein, “A Constitution Day Address,” December 8, 2017, retrieved December 20, 2017, <http://www.heritage.org/the-constitution/report/constitution-day-address>; “Rights Around the World,” National Constitution Center, retrieved December 20, 2017, <http://constitutionalrights.constitutioncenter.org/app/home/world>.

developed nation) and net immigration.<sup>58</sup> It has good bankruptcy laws and liquid capital markets that foster business creation.<sup>59</sup> It has outstanding universities and the world's best research infrastructure.<sup>60</sup> It is blessed with good neighbors in Canada and Mexico. America has abundant natural resources, plenty of arable land, and room for a growing population. It remains committed to respecting property, both physical and intellectual. Its position between two oceans and the world's two largest markets makes it an ideal partner in the global economy. Finally, the nation (*contra* the *National Security Strategy*) has a strong military that needs transformation more than it needs rebuilding.

Of course, the United States has problems too. Notably, high federal deficits and an increasing national debt, violent crime with resulting mass incarceration, and rapidly rising health care costs with relatively poor health outcomes. However on balance, America remains uniquely positioned and richly resourced to maintain its position as the preeminent world power, and to promote prosperity and freedom worldwide through constructive engagement.

Doing so requires innovative and forward-thinking strategic approaches that are based in reality. It would make little sense for the executives of General Motors to recreate the capabilities that produced its dominance in the 1950s and 1960s. Consumers today would

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<sup>58</sup> Lee Kuan Yew, "Warning Bell for Developed Countries: Declining Birth Rates," *Forbes*, October 16, 2012, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/currentevents/2012/10/16/warning-bell-for-developed-countries-declining-birth-rates/-511aac823641>.

<sup>59</sup> Stacey Vanek Smith, "The Latest American Export: Bankruptcy Law," *All Things Considered*, September 10, 2015, <https://www.npr.org/2015/09/10/439246992/the-latest-american-export-bankruptcy-laws>.

<sup>60</sup> "World University Rankings 2016-2017," *The World University Rankings*, retrieved December 20, 2017, [https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/2017/world-ranking-!/page/0/length/25/sort\\_by/rank/sort\\_order/asc/cols/stats](https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/2017/world-ranking-!/page/0/length/25/sort_by/rank/sort_order/asc/cols/stats).



find little appealing in the beautifully designed, gas-guzzling death-traps of that era. The strategy's nostalgic desire to "rebuild" the U.S. military to the peak capabilities it displayed in Operation Desert Storm is similarly inappropriate. The document acknowledges that, "adversaries and competitors became adept at operating below the threshold of open military conflict and at the edges of international law," but military "readiness" remains focused on training to fight conventional military formations in open battle.<sup>61</sup> The emerging competitive environment is not the one that U.S. leaders faced in the past. Those were happy days, no doubt, but the tanks, manned aircraft, and aircraft carriers of that era may not be what the emerging future of warfare demands.<sup>62</sup> Yet that is what the military is most intent on "rebuilding" through its current acquisition programs<sup>63</sup> — another demonstration of the Department of Defense's astonishing ability to justify its pre-existing force structure and platforms, despite constantly changing strategic demands.<sup>64</sup> This is not forward thinking. The strategy's preoccupation with

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<sup>61</sup> Gen. Mark A. Milley, "Army Readiness Guidance, Calendar Year 2016-17," United States Army, January 20, 2016, [https://www.army.mil/e2/downloads/rv7/standto/docs/army\\_readiness\\_guidance.pdf](https://www.army.mil/e2/downloads/rv7/standto/docs/army_readiness_guidance.pdf)

<sup>62</sup> Kelsey D. Atherton, "The Pentagon's New Drone Swarm Heralds a Future of Autonomous War Machines," *Popular Science*, January 10, 2017, <https://www.popsci.com/pentagon-drone-swarm-autonomous-war-machines>; Robert Rath, "Are Robots Really the Future of War?" *Waypoint*, December 14, 2016, [https://waypoint.vice.com/en\\_us/article/d7pwnz/titans-falling-are-robots-really-the-future-of-war](https://waypoint.vice.com/en_us/article/d7pwnz/titans-falling-are-robots-really-the-future-of-war); Justin Bachman, "How America's Aircraft Carriers Could Become Obsolete," *Bloomberg*, June 28, 2017, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-06-28/how-america-s-aircraft-carriers-could-become-obsolete>.

<sup>63</sup> "Defense Acquisitions: Assessments of Selected Weapon Programs," U.S. Government Accountability Office Report to Congressional Committees, March 2017, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/690/683838.pdf>.

<sup>64</sup> Mark Gunzinger, "Shaping America's Future Military: Toward a New Force Planning Construct," Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, June 13, 2013, <http://csbaonline.org/research/publications/shaping-america-s-future-military-toward-a-new-force-planning-construct/publication>.

looking backward plays right to the military's preference for sticking with what is comfortable and familiar.

America has always been a nation uniquely untethered from its past, for better and for worse, but usually for better. The United States was established as a great nation with some glaring problems. It has remained so: a great nation, with glaring problems.

Overstating our current difficulties or overlooking our past troubles will not help us to enlarge that greatness or to reduce the problems. We need a realistic national security strategy that takes up the present as it is.

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*The views expressed here are his own and do not represent those of the U.S. Army War College, the Department of the Army, the Department of Defense, or any part of the U.S. government.*



## 4. Cyber and Calvinball: What's Missing From Trump's National Security Strategy?

Ben Buchanan

President Donald Trump's first *National Security Strategy*<sup>65</sup> is out, and the contours of the hot takes are familiar: Which adversaries got big coverage? Which didn't? What will it mean for the budgets of Agency X, the Department of Y, or Program Z? And every take is, of course, subject to hand-wringing about whether the strategy matters at all (always a lively discussion, but a question that is especially relevant with a president who might not have read the document).

I'll leave this more traditional territory to others and focus on a different question: Does the new strategy grasp the current state of affairs in international cyber-security and outline America's plan to manage it?

Specifically, does the Trump administration recognize and address that, in cyberspace, America's adversaries are playing Calvinball\* (the famous game from the *Calvin and Hobbes* cartoon strip in which there are no rules)<sup>66</sup> while the United States is still playing a regimented and well-defined game of chess?

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<sup>65</sup> The White House, *The National Security Strategy of the United States*, December, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

<sup>66</sup> Calvin and Hobbes, "Very Sorry," retrieved December 20, 2017, <http://www.picpak.net/calvin/oldsite/images/verysorry.jpg>.

The short answer is no. The strategy's relevant sections are all about the classical and well-defined mechanics, broadly speaking, of American cyber-security. Its stated priorities are risk management, network defense, deterrence, information sharing, and establishing layered defenses. Though the discussion in these areas is fairly solid, this ground is so well-trodden that it is as hard as concrete. Many of the proposed steps forward are fairly predictable, such as pledging to streamline authorization and "improve the integration of authorities and procedures across the U.S. government so that cyber operations against adversaries can be conducted as required." Done right, these sorts of actions are useful, but the devil is in the details — something that a strategy document rarely contains.

Most worryingly, though, the document misses the opportunity to make strategic sense of what happened in cyber-operations in 2016. The foreign hacking activity that should have served as a wake-up call and an indication that previous American strategies needed revising is mostly ignored. In so doing, the strategy mostly sidesteps three of the most pressing national security questions the United States faces: First, how can America deter adversaries, particularly Russian hackers emboldened by their successful interference in the 2016 election, from acting similarly again? Second, how can it defend American electoral networks from foreign penetration? And third, how can it manage the clear and present threat of information operations enabled in part by hacking, a danger that strikes at the very heart of the democratic process?

A few years ago, these questions and their answers would have seemed fairly speculative and out of place in the national security strategy. It was taken as a given that American elections were secure from foreign intelligence agencies, or that those agencies would likely be deterred from interference. While the flaws in American voting infrastructure deserved attention, it felt like a matter of domestic politics and policy more than an

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international concern. Large-scale information operations at home were far from the minds of most American national security policymakers. Information operations practitioners were mostly concerned with what the United States could do to improve its image in the Muslim world and undermine violent extremism.

But that world has given way to a different one. In this new world, where the old rules and assumptions about adversary behavior no longer apply, this document should outline what Washington's strategy will be.

There is an opportunity for strategic answers to these questions. One natural option is to re-establish some rules through deterrence. It is reported, for example, that President Barack Obama threatened Russia just before the election in order to assure that its hackers did not manipulate the vote tallies.<sup>67</sup> Does the Trump administration believe deterrence worked in that case, and would similar warnings work again? The Obama administration punished Russia by expelling "diplomats" and seizing compounds likely involved in intelligence activity. Will that be part of the Trump administration's new strategy? More generally, can attempts at cyber deterrence even constrain adversary behavior, or is that a distraction in the no-holds-barred world of cyber-security? The section on deterrence in the national security strategy is largely silent on these important points, instead reciting vague language about consequences and resilience.

But not only does the strategy not address how the United States should engage in cyber Calvinball, it doesn't seem to even acknowledge that Calvinball is the game *du jour*.

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<sup>67</sup> David E. Sanger, "White House Confirms Pre-Election Warning to Russia Over Hacking," *New York Times*, November 16, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/17/us/politics/white-house-confirms-pre-election-warning-to-russia-over-hacking.html>.

There's not even direct mention of the election hacking activities in 2016. The document addresses Russian interference in domestic political affairs, but with the distancing caveat that the Russian activity occurs "around the world." The next sentence focuses on Eurasia, suggesting the authors' reluctance to acknowledge that such interference happened in the United States and could well happen again. The discussion of foreign information operations calls out Russia (even if the president will not) — which is good — but again includes the distancing language of "around the globe." Most of the priority actions in this section are improving American information operation overseas, something which would be nice but which will do little to stop Russian efforts to sow division within our borders.

Even where the strategy does acknowledge how foreign hacking "can undermine faith and confidence in democratic institutions," it once again misdirects. The priority actions in this section refer to improving attribution — not an area of dispute for Russia's 2016 anti-democratic activities for anyone outside the Trump orbit — bolstering government hiring and retention, and streamlining American cyber-operations and authorities. These would all be good things to do, but, once again, they are chess moves.

In the end, Calvin and Hobbes devised a single rule for Calvinball: You can't play it the same way twice. Unfortunately, that rule doesn't apply in cyber-security. Adversaries can employ the same tactics again and again with success. And, until U.S. strategy recognizes that and stops them, they will.

\*This analogy comes from a conversation earlier this year on [Twitter](#) between myself and @TheGrugq.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Ben Buchanan, "Nations are always playing Calvinball with cyber operations. The sooner they (and the scholars who study them) realize it, the better," Twitter, August 22, 2017, <https://twitter.com/BuchananBen/status/900176422047821824>.

<sup>69</sup> Ben Buchanan, *The Cybersecurity Dilemma: Hacking, Trust and Fear Between Nations*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), <https://www.amazon.com/Cybersecurity-Dilemma-Hacking-between-Nations/dp/0190665017%3FSubscriptionId=AKIAJBDF5XQBATGDX4VQ%26tag=spea06-20%26linkCode=xm2%26camp=2025%26creative=165953%26creativeASIN=0190665017>.

## 5. China, America, and the End of the Responsible Stakeholder Theory

Zack Cooper and Mira Rapp-Hooper

As observers of Asian security peruse the *National Security Strategy*,<sup>70</sup> many will wonder what to make of the document. There is no shortage of expert opinions. Micah Zenko argues that the strategy should be “ignored.”<sup>71</sup> Eliot Cohen suggests that the strategy “offers a few clues, and that is about it.”<sup>72</sup> Richard Haass asserts that it will have “a fairly short shelf life.”<sup>73</sup> On the issue of China, however, the strategy’s message is blunt and could be of lasting significance.

For decades, the United States has sought to make China a “responsible stakeholder” in the existing regional and international order.<sup>74</sup> By incorporating China into existing

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<sup>70</sup> The White House, *The National Security Strategy of the United States*, December, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

<sup>71</sup> Micah Zenko, “Trump’s National Security Strategy Deserves to Be Ignored,” *Foreign Policy*, December 18, 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/12/18/trumps-national-security-strategy-deserves-to-be-ignored/>.

<sup>72</sup> Eliot Cohen, “Three Ways to Read Trump’s National Security Strategy,” *The Atlantic*, December 18, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/12/three-ways-to-read-trumps-national-security-strategy/548711/>.

<sup>73</sup> Mark Landler and David E. Sanger, “Trump Delivers a Mixed Message on His National Security Approach,” *New York Times*, December 18, 2017, [https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/18/us/politics/trump-security-strategy-china-russia.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/18/us/politics/trump-security-strategy-china-russia.html?_r=0).

<sup>74</sup> Amitai Etzioni, “Is China a Responsible Stakeholder?” *International Affairs* 87, no. 3 (May, 2011), 539–553. [http://www.jstor.org/stable/20869712?casa\\_token=oY4VnSuSYXoAAAAA:1BVWFrXTBgZaaWQ\\_zXs2BzPV7\\_fo03V8g81taWCxITS7HHly4iJ59DxDd6YIOiZgaqyaLMpsUI8HNL4oia72YXRyY5aQlP9YEGCItb7hUTPKiXUekxBQew&seq=1 - page\\_scan\\_tab\\_contents](http://www.jstor.org/stable/20869712?casa_token=oY4VnSuSYXoAAAAA:1BVWFrXTBgZaaWQ_zXs2BzPV7_fo03V8g81taWCxITS7HHly4iJ59DxDd6YIOiZgaqyaLMpsUI8HNL4oia72YXRyY5aQlP9YEGCItb7hUTPKiXUekxBQew&seq=1 - page_scan_tab_contents).



institutions and power structures, this narrative held, the international order would help to make China a benign major power. At the very least, the order would change China more than China would change it. The most consequential China-related statement in the 2017 *National Security Strategy* is the declaration that this strategy has failed. As the document notes in its introduction

[T]he assumption that engagement with rivals and their inclusion in international institutions and global commerce would turn them into benign actors and trustworthy partners... turned out to be false.

This statement has potentially momentous ramifications for U.S. strategy. If the “responsible stakeholder” approach has been rejected, then the United States must adopt an entirely new strategy — one that is presumably embraces competition with China and seeks to contain its influence.

Despite this lofty charge, however, four obvious challenges plague the *Strategy*’s new approach to China. First, having discarded the “responsible stakeholder” premise, the *National Security Strategy* does not actually lay out a new strategy. Second, the administration would be well-advised to avoid approaches that force Asian states to choose between China and the United States. Third, a more competitive approach will be difficult with shrinking pools of resources and personnel. Finally, the administration must contend with the current U.S. president’s unpredictability and tendency to take a soft line towards Beijing. For these reasons, discussed in more detail below, the Trump administration will likely struggle to make its rhetorical shift into a strategic reality.

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## The End of the Responsible Stakeholder Theory

In 2005, then-Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick called on China to be a “responsible stakeholder” and welcomed a “confident, peaceful, and prosperous China.”<sup>75</sup> Zoellick was giving voice to a set of assumptions that had basically guided U.S. policy towards China since the 1970s: China’s rise was inevitable, but if the United States worked to shape its ascent, it could forestall the antagonism that so often plagues major power shifts. Republican and Democratic administrations alike adhered to the view that the United States should engage Beijing in order to integrate China into the regional and global order, giving it a stake in the institutions, rules, and norms the United States had built, rather than give it incentive to oppose them. Zoellick’s view was rooted in four assertions: First, China did not spread anti-American ideologies. Second, China did not seek to undermine democracies. Third, China did not seek to undermine capitalism. And last, China did not “believe that its future depends on overturning the fundamental order of the international system.” The Trump administration’s *National Security Strategy* appears to reject each of these assertions.

Whereas some previous administrations were divided between national security hawks and economic doves, China policy appears to be the one area where the Trump administration’s security internationalists and the economic nationalists agree. The security internationalists (including the lead authors of the *National Security Strategy*), see China as a “revisionist power” that “seeks to displace the United States in the Indo-Pacific region.” The economic nationalists view China as an economic threat, noting that

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<sup>75</sup> Robert Zoellick, “Whither China? From Membership to Responsibility,” (Keynote speech, National Committee on United States-China Relations Members’ Gala, New York City, NY, September 21, 2005), [https://www.ncuscr.org/sites/default/files/migration/Zoellick\\_remarks\\_noteso6\\_winter\\_spring.pdf](https://www.ncuscr.org/sites/default/files/migration/Zoellick_remarks_noteso6_winter_spring.pdf).

“competitors such as China steal U.S. intellectual property valued at hundreds of billions of dollars.” Security internationalists worry that Chinese leaders will “change the international order in their favor.” Economic nationalists believe that they already have, noting that China “exploited the international institutions we helped to build.”

These two camps of China thinkers have not always agreed on specific policies towards Beijing, but a tougher China line now appears to unify the administration’s competing camps. One need look no further than the second page of the strategy, which states that China is “attempting to erode American security and prosperity.” The administration sees China as fusing its own security and economic policies, noting

China is using economic inducements and penalties... to persuade other states to heed its political and security agenda. China’s infrastructure investments and trade strategies reinforce its geopolitical aspirations.

In many other areas, the Trump administration has two sets of competing policies, one from the security internationalists and another from the economic nationalists (and sometimes another from the president himself). Yet in this document, the Trump administration is embracing one China policy. Or at least it is trying.

## Matching Rhetoric and Reality

Following the release of the *National Security Strategy*, the Chinese Foreign Ministry countered by noting: “Cooperation is the only correct choice for China and the United States... We urge the U.S. side to stop intentionally distorting China’s strategic

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intentions.”<sup>76</sup> Yet, some Asia experts in Washington are already hailing the Trump administration’s shrewd shift on China policy. Mike Green calls the document “the beginnings of a coherent strategy.”<sup>77</sup> Patrick Cronin goes so far as to anoint the strategy as the “most strategic published by any administration.”<sup>78</sup> Nevertheless, turning this new strategic premise into a tangible U.S. foreign policy approach will prove challenging for four reasons.

First, having discarded the old China strategy, the administration will now have to develop a new approach, and has not done so in this document. The Trump administration is breaking with decades of U.S. strategy, but its pessimism about the “responsible stakeholder” approach actually reflects an emerging consensus in Washington. Few experts still believe that the United States can shape China’s rise the way Washington once hoped.<sup>79</sup> Most agree that China will be whatever type of major

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<sup>76</sup> Reuters Staff, “China Urges Cooperation after U.S. Brands It a Competitor,” *Reuters*, December 18, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-nationalsecurity-china/china-urges-cooperation-after-u-s-brands-it-a-competitor-idUSKBN1EDoCF?feedType=RSS&feedName=topNews>.

<sup>77</sup> Mike Green, “The NSS and the China Challenge,” *Foreign Policy*, December 18, 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/12/18/the-nss-and-the-china-challenge/>.

<sup>78</sup> Patrick Cronin (@PMCroninCNAS), “Agree or disagree and gap between rhetoric and reality aside, this NSS is the truest and most strategic published by any administration,” Twitter, December 18, 2017, <https://twitter.com/PMCroninCNAS/status/942831480363016192>.

<sup>79</sup> Andrew J. Nathan, “The Chinese World Order,” review of *The End of the Asian Century: War, Stagnation, and the Risks to the World’s Most Dynamic Region*, by Michael R. Auslin, *Post-Western World, How Emerging Powers Are Remaking Global Order*, by Oliver Stuenkel, and *Destined for War: Can America Escape Thucydides’s Trap?* by Graham Allison. *New York Review of Books*, October 12, 2017. <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2017/10/12/chinese-world-order/>.

power it wants to be.<sup>80</sup> In some areas, Chinese and U.S. interests may be directly and increasingly conflictual; in others, they may remain somewhat aligned. But the *National Security Strategy* does not address the central question at hand: If China is not going to integrate into the existing order, then what is the logic of U.S. engagement? Does the United States seek to exclude China from existing aspects of the international order in which it was previously included? Will it form new power structures that reject Beijing's influence? And what specific policies will the administration implement to pursue this vision? If Trump's buoyant visit to China last month is any indicator, the administration is still figuring out how to translate its ideas into action.

Second, despite its new premise, the administration is still shackled to certain balance of power realities in Asia: It should avoid a Manichean strategy that forces regional states to choose between China and the United States. China's actions over the last decade have caused concern in Washington and in other foreign capitals. In the words of former Secretary of Defense Ash Carter, China has erected "a great wall of self-isolation."<sup>81</sup> The strategy argues that this has driven regional states to call for "for sustained U.S. leadership." But if the United States is seen as being overly confrontational, it will risk the support of the vulnerable states in Southeast Asia, such as the Philippines,<sup>82</sup> that are critical to its strategy. At present, China is attempting to position itself as the more

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<sup>80</sup> Björn Jerdén, Jean-Pierre Cabestan, Paul Haenle, and Shen Dingli, "Don't Call it the New Chinese Global Order (Yet)," *Foreign Policy*, March 7, 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/03/07/dont-call-it-the-chinese-global-order-yet-xi-jinping-donald-trump-values/>.

<sup>81</sup> Wendell Minnick, "Carter Warns of Chinese 'Great Wall of Self-Isolation,'" *Defense News*, June 4, 2016, <https://www.defensenews.com/2016/06/04/carter-warns-of-chinese-great-wall-of-self-isolation/>.

<sup>82</sup> Aileen S. P. Baviera, "Duterte's China Policy Shift: Strategy or Serendipity?" *East Asia Forum*, August 13, 2017, <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2017/08/13/dutertes-china-policy-shift-strategy-or-serendipity/>.

dependable great power in the region, and a more predictable alternative to the United States.<sup>83</sup> The United States can only counter this narrative if it presents a positive agenda for the region, rather than simply seeking to undermine China's role. Getting this balancing act right will be challenging, particularly for a president who is critical of trade agreements<sup>84</sup> and skeptical of alliances<sup>85</sup> — two traditional pillars of U.S. foreign policy in Asia.

Third, if the Trump administration wishes to implement a more competitive approach to China, this will necessarily require more personnel and resources than past strategies, despite the fact that both are currently in short supply. Changing any U.S. government policy is difficult, but particularly so with a policy as central as the premise that has long guided the U.S. approach to China. The shortage of trusted Asia hands in the government will accentuate these difficulties. With few confirmed high-level officials, the administration lacks the human resources to communicate how China policy is changing or what the practical implications of a new approach will be. One can also presume that a more competitive China strategy would rely more heavily on the U.S. military presence in Asia, yet this document does not hint at how the American defense role might change, and Congress is unlikely to authorize a radical increase in defense spending. Moreover, the most sustainable approach to competition with China would rely heavily on

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<sup>83</sup> Mira Rapp-Hooper, "What China Wants from Trump," *Foreign Affairs*, November 7, 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/2017-11-07/what-china-wants-trump>.

<sup>84</sup> Kevin Liptak and Dan Merica, "Trump Delivers 'America First' Speech at Asia-Pacific Economic Summit," CNN, November 10, 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2017/11/10/politics/donald-trump-apec-vietnam-trade/index.html>.

<sup>85</sup> Choe Sang-Hun and Motoko Rich, "South Korean Leader Boxed In as Trump Threatens North Korea," *New York Times*, November 3, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/03/world/asia/south-korea-trump-nuclear.html>.

cooperation with allies and partners, yet regional states are unlikely to take kindly to the strategy's insistence that they should "shoulder a fair share of the burden of responsibility to protect against common threats." Again, the absence of an affirmative regional agenda will make a competitive approach all the more burdensome, with no indication of how the administration intends to defray those costs.

Fourth, and perhaps most significantly, the declaration that the United States is abandoning the "responsible stakeholder" approach will be of little consequence if the president himself continues to undermine the efforts of the administration's China hawks. On his November trip to Asia, Trump's national security team attempted to unfurl the beginnings of a new approach to the region, relying on an "Indo-Pacific Security Framework,"<sup>86</sup> that implied close cooperation with democratic allies and an alternative to Chinese leadership, presaging the *National Security Strategy*. While in Beijing, however, the president abandoned his own tough, anti-China campaign rhetoric, heaping praise on Xi Jinping, extolling their personal relationship, and absolving China of its most discriminatory economic practices.<sup>87</sup> Despite statements to the contrary, Trump has wrangled few concessions from Beijing on North Korea, and has taken only modest action on trade policy. In practice, the Trump administration has been surprisingly soft on China in its first year in office. As many analysts have observed,<sup>88</sup> the president holds the power

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<sup>86</sup> Matthew Pennington, "Renaming Asia: Trump Admin Opts for Indo-Pacific," *Associated Press*, November 3, 2017, <https://apnews.com/c8e055cb57014e8383f5bba51a4f7197>.

<sup>87</sup> Mark Landler, Julie Hirschfeld Davis, and Jane Perlez, "Trump, Aiming to Coax Xi Jinping, Bets on Flattery," *New York Times*, November 9, 2017, [https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/09/world/asia/trump-xi-jinping-north-korea.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/09/world/asia/trump-xi-jinping-north-korea.html?_r=0).

<sup>88</sup> Kate Brannen, "Trump's National Security Strategy is Decidedly Non-Trumpian," *The Atlantic*, December 8, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/12/trump-nss-diplomacy-security-foreign-policy/547937/>.

to quickly undermine the new China framework the *National Security Strategy* has laid out.<sup>89</sup> If his past instincts are any indication, he is likely to do so in short order.

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<sup>89</sup> Peter Beinart, “Trump Doesn’t Seem to Buy His Own National Security Strategy,” *The Atlantic*, December 19, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/12/nss-trump-principled-realism/548741/>.



## 6. Economics in the National Security Strategy: Principles vs. Practices

Phil Levy

To date, the Trump administration's approach to international trade and global economic interaction has seemed anything but strategic. The president floated bold (if alarming) campaign ideas such as high tariffs on China and Mexico, only to abandon the plans once in office. An investigation into the national security impacts of steel and aluminum trade was launched with fanfare,<sup>90</sup> only to linger incomplete, six months after its original due date. Within days last month, President Donald Trump went from saying China was blameless in its economic behavior<sup>91</sup> to publicly attacking China's predatory practices.<sup>92</sup> A near-withdrawal from the North American Free Trade Agreement seemed to reveal an ongoing internal battle between nationalist and internationalist economic advisers, perhaps explaining the schizophrenic approach to policy.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Phil Levy, "President Trump's Steel Confusion," *Forbes*, July 16, 2017,

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/phillevy/2017/11/29/the-trump-administrations-china-trade-confusion/-49bcddc95b95>.

<sup>91</sup> Jeremy Diamond and Kevin Liptak, "Trump Blames U.S. for Trade Gap with China," *CNN*, November 9, 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2017/11/08/politics/donald-trump-xi-jinping-statement/index.html>.

<sup>92</sup> Oliver Holmes and Tom Phillips, "Trump Attacks Countries 'Cheating' America at Apec Summit," *The Guardian*, November 10, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/nov/10/trump-attacks-countries-cheating-america-at-apec-summit>.

<sup>93</sup> Ashley Parker, Philip Rucker, Damian Paletta, and Karen DeYoung, "'I Was All Set to Terminate': Inside Trump's Sudden Shift on NAFTA," *Washington Post*, April 27, 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/i-was-all-set-to-terminate-inside-trumps-sudden-shift-on-nafta/2017/04/27/0452a3fa-2b65-11e7-b605-33413c691853\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.eboe008989d8](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/i-was-all-set-to-terminate-inside-trumps-sudden-shift-on-nafta/2017/04/27/0452a3fa-2b65-11e7-b605-33413c691853_story.html?utm_term=.eboe008989d8).

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If there is a virtue to grand vision documents, such as a *National Security Strategy*,<sup>94</sup> it is the possibility that conflicting internal positions may be sorted out. Given the dominance of the United States in the international economic sphere, other countries have been desperately trying to make sense of the conflicting signals emanating from the new administration. While the new strategy will give them much to mull over, and a few signs of hope, it ultimately will not deliver either the clarity or reassurance they crave.

International trade and economic competition earn a starring role in the Trump administration's new *National Security Strategy*. As the president said in his speech unveiling the strategy, "For the first time, American strategy recognizes that economic security is national security."<sup>95</sup> International economic engagement emerges as an important component of "America First" in its own right — restoring American prosperity — and then again as a key strategic tool in the guise of economic diplomacy.

Many of the economic principles espoused in the document fit easily into the American post-war tradition, just with a liberal sprinkling of the adjectives "fair" and "reciprocal" tossed in. The United States prospered because of "political and economic triumphs built on market economies and fair trade." The United States will "compete and lead in multilateral organizations so that American interests and principles are protected." And if one wanted to take statements out of context, the inveighing against the damage of

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<sup>94</sup> The White House, *The National Security Strategy of the United States*, December, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

<sup>95</sup> "Remarks by President Trump on the Administration's National Security Strategy," White House (website), December 18, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-administrations-national-security-strategy/>.

“significant government intrusion in the economy” could be used as a warning against the adoption of new trade barriers.

In fact, if one did not know better, one could combine a few statements in the strategy and conclude that the Trump administration is ready to erect some sort of Trans-Pacific Partnership. For example, the document states, “By strengthening the international trading system and incentivizing other countries to embrace market-friendly policies, we can enhance our prosperity.” It further notes that “when America does not lead, malign actors fill the void to the disadvantage of the United States.” It also commits the United States to “work with partners to build a network of states dedicated to free markets.”

Of course, Trump intends nothing of the sort. In his unveiling speech he bragged, “We have withdrawn the United States from job-killing deals such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership.” This illustrates the danger of mining a strategy document for nuggets of reassurance and searching for a logic that is not actually there.

Before turning to further inconsistencies between principle and practice, though, it is worth considering some additional principles that offer a contrast with past tradition, either apparent or real. First, the illusory contrast:

[T]he United States will no longer turn a blind eye to violations, cheating, or economic aggression. We must work with like-minded allies and partners to ensure our principles prevail and the rules are enforced so that our economies prosper.

While purporting to mark a sharp break with past practice, this profession of ardor for trade enforcement has become a cliché for new occupants of the Oval Office. President Barack Obama certainly promised to reverse the Bush administration’s alleged lapses in trade enforcement vigor. The problems tend to come in implementation.<sup>96</sup>

The true principled departure from the post-war consensus — and from generally accepted economics — in Trump’s thought lies in the emphasis on trade imbalances. Here, though, the *National Security Strategy* is remarkably low-key: “We will insist upon fair and reciprocal economic relationships to address trade imbalances.” When they put it that way, it seems tame enough to encompass Obama administration efforts at the G-20 to coax Germany and China to address their current account surpluses.<sup>97</sup> The strategy’s statement that the “trade deficit grew as a result of several factors, including unfair trade practices” is dramatically toned-down from “job-killing deals.” But since the President is still using the stronger language, one wonders how significant the instance of written restraint might be.

The *National Security Strategy* sets moderation aside in its depiction of a world of friends and foes. This seems more novel in the economic realm than in the more traditional security context. The villain, of course, is China:

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<sup>96</sup> Doug Palmer, “Trade Enforcement: Obama vs. Bush,” *Politico*, August 23, 2014,

<https://www.politico.com/story/2014/08/barack-obama-trade-enforcement-110277>.

<sup>97</sup> Howard LaFranchi, “Why World Leaders Smacked Down Obama at G20 Summit,” *Christian Science*

*Monitor*, November 12, 2010, <https://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Foreign-Policy/2010/1112/Why-world-leaders-smacked-down-Obama-at-G20-summit>.

As we took our political, economic, and military advantages for granted, other actors steadily implemented their long-term plans to challenge America and to advance agendas opposed to the United States, our allies, and our partners. We stood by while countries exploited the international institutions we helped to build. They subsidized their industries, forced technology transfers, and distorted markets.

The document accuses predecessors, both Democrat and Republican, of naïveté, noting that these actions

require the United States to rethink the policies of the past two decades — policies based on the assumption that engagement with rivals and their inclusion in international institutions and global commerce would turn them into benign actors and trustworthy partners. For the most part, this premise turned out to be false.

While the plural here allows for the inclusion of North Korea, Russia, and Iran, none of them are significant economic actors. This is clearly about China.<sup>98</sup> The indictment raises a number of important questions, most too broad to treat adequately here: Was it a mistake to bring China into the World Trade Organization? How much economic damage did China's inclusion do to the United States?<sup>99</sup> What alternative strategies would have yielded superior outcomes? Has China consistently violated the rules of the global trading

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<sup>98</sup> Shawn Donnan, "Trump's China Strategy: Trade War or American Game," *Financial Times*, December 18, 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/d6cebf7e-e449-11e7-97e2-916d4fbacoda>.

<sup>99</sup> Phil Levy, "Did China Trade Cost the United States 2.4 Million Jobs?" *Foreign Policy*, May 8, 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/05/08/did-china-trade-cost-the-united-states-2-4-million-jobs/>.

system? Or do those outdated rules just fail to forbid Chinese behavior we currently find objectionable? How, exactly, will the United States alter Chinese economic behavior going forward?

In the strategy context, the most relevant of these questions are the ones asking about policy alternatives. Presumably, a good strategy helps one make such choices. Certainly, prior to the release of the *National Security Strategy*, the Trump administration's behavior toward China has not offered much clarity. At different points, the Trump administration has seemed to have different and conflicting objectives in its relationship with China.<sup>100</sup> Is it more important to punish China for its policies toward U.S. companies, incentivize China to help with North Korea, or thank China for promises of new commercial deals? The one actual accomplishment of the administration in this arena was a relatively quick and minor trade deal that Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross described as a "Herculean accomplishment."<sup>101</sup>

The Chinese could have been forgiven for thinking that, between head-of-state summitry and that deal, relations with the Trump administration were fairly copacetic. They will not think that now, but they won't have a very clear idea where the Trump administration intends to go, either.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Levy, "Steel Confusion."

<sup>101</sup> The Associated Press, "Commerce Secretary Ross Calls the New U.S.-China Trade Deal a 'Herculean Accomplishment,'" *Fortune*, May 12, 2017, <http://fortune.com/2017/05/12/china-us-poultry-trade-deal/>.

<sup>102</sup> Emily Rauhala and Andrew Roth, "China Left Wondering What 'America First' Foreign Policy Actually Means," *Washington Post*, December 19, 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/rival-china-left-wondering-what-america-first-foreign-policy-actually-means/2017/12/19/ad76bc8a-e43a-11e7-927a-e72eac1e73b6\\_story.html?tid=ss\\_tw&utm\\_term=.do58839b03fc](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/rival-china-left-wondering-what-america-first-foreign-policy-actually-means/2017/12/19/ad76bc8a-e43a-11e7-927a-e72eac1e73b6_story.html?tid=ss_tw&utm_term=.do58839b03fc).

Contrast the treatment of the Chinese foe in the *National Security Strategy* with the treatment of friends. The strategy notes, “We recognize the invaluable advantages that our strong relationships with allies and partners deliver.” Not only do we value these allies, we will work together in international settings. For example:

Maintaining America’s central role in international financial forums enhances our security and prosperity by expanding a community of free market economies, defending against threats from state-led economies, and protecting the U.S. and international economy from abuse by illicit actors ... Prosperous states are stronger security partners who are able to share the burden of confronting common threats.

To read this, one might think the United States was preparing to launch a new initiative at the World Trade Organization, or perhaps getting ready to strike plurilateral deals with like-minded Atlantic and Pacific partners. The timing of the *National Security Strategy* claims is a bit awkward, however, after the recent conclusion of a WTO meeting in which the United States, for the first time in the post-war era, seemed to show a striking disdain for the body.<sup>103</sup>

It is in the treatment of allies that the contrast between the economic goals espoused in the *National Security Strategy* and the actual practice of the Trump administration is starkest. If one went by the actual trade policies of the last year, one would think the

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<sup>103</sup> Phil Levy, “The Trump Administration’s Artless Dealing with the WTO,” *Forbes*, December 16, 2017, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/phillevy/2017/12/16/the-trump-administrations-artless-dealing-with-the-wto/-cdoe17742580>.

greatest economic threat to the United States came from Canada. While the *National Security Strategy* speaks of renegotiating trade deals, the only formal renegotiation underway is of the North American Free Trade Agreement, with Canada and Mexico. The national security trade review of steel and aluminum trade seems most likely to hit Canada, as the top supplier of imported steel (17 percent of U.S. supply in 2016, versus 3 percent from China).<sup>104</sup> The Trump administration revived a dispute over imports of Canadian softwood lumber<sup>105</sup> and seemed to encourage another dispute over passenger aircraft.<sup>106</sup>

Close behind Canada in the competition for “top Trump trade target” would be Mexico (NAFTA) and South Korea (demands for trade agreement renegotiation).<sup>107</sup> Japan faced rejection through the dismissal of the Trans-Pacific Partnership. Europe, which had been negotiating a free trade deal with the Obama administration, has seen it set aside under Trump.

In the section discussing the Indo-Pacific region, the *National Security Strategy* declares, “We will pursue bilateral trade agreements on a fair and reciprocal basis.” This is consistent with the vision that President Trump has espoused repeatedly — a turn away

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<sup>104</sup> Levy, “Steel Confusion.”

<sup>105</sup> Phil Levy, “Why Is the Trump Administration Faking a Trade War with Canada?” *Forbes*, April 26, 2017, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/phillevy/2017/04/26/why-fake-a-trade-war/-46073a3d1be5>.

<sup>106</sup> Reuters, “Boeing-Bombardier Dispute Ramps Up at U.S. Trade Hearing,” *CNBC*, December 18, 2017, <https://www.cnbc.com/2017/12/18/boeing-bombardier-dispute-ramps-up-at-us-trade-hearing.html>.

<sup>107</sup> Phil Levy, “Trump Is Considering the Worst Possible Response to the North Korea Threat,” *Foreign Policy*, September 6, 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/09/06/trump-is-considering-the-worst-possible-response-to-the-north-korean-threat/>.



from the unfairness of multilateral deals to a new world of fair bilateral bargains. There are at least five major problems with this vision, however.

First, you need a lot of bilaterals to make up for a multilateral. Between the 28 countries of Europe and the 11 other participants in the Trans-Pacific Partnership, the United States was in trade talks with 39 countries a year ago. Now that number is down to two (Canada and Mexico). No other deals are underway.

Second, the difficult experience of the NAFTA renegotiation shows there is no plan to realize the vision of a “fair and reciprocal” trade approach that fixes trade imbalances. Even the controversial proposals tabled by the United States in those negotiations offer no policies to achieve trade balance. Further, the novel Trump proposals are generally seen as unacceptable both by partner countries and by U.S. industry.<sup>108</sup>

Third, the NAFTA experience has deterred others. While the Trump administration has expressed interest in a bilateral deal with Japan, the sentiment is unrequited.<sup>109</sup>

Fourth, bilateral deals, unlike multilateral pacts, are generally too varied to establish new global rules. It is exactly such rulemaking that is required to deal with the China challenge that the *National Security Strategy* highlights.

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<sup>108</sup> Phil Levy, “NAFTA Negotiations from the Other Side: What Mexico and Canada Can Do,” *Forbes*, November 28, 2017, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/phillevy/2017/11/28/nafta-negotiations-from-the-other-side-of-the-table/-2fbaaaoc1948>.

<sup>109</sup> Leika Kihara, “U.S., Japan Fail to Bridge Gap on Trade in Economic Talks,” *Reuters*, October 16, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-japan-dialogue/u-s-japan-fail-to-bridge-gap-on-trade-in-economic-talks-idUSKBN1CL2FM>.

Finally, there is no time to execute this strategy.<sup>110</sup> Even if other countries were willing and the Trump negotiators had a viable approach, trade deals take a long time. This is not because U.S. negotiators are inefficient. It's because Congress requires extensive periods of notification and consultation before, during, and after a deal is struck. It is also worth noting here, that under the Constitution, it is Congress that sets strategy on trade policy.<sup>111</sup>

To summarize, while the *National Security Strategy* paints a vision of working with allies and partners to confront China, Trump administration practice to date has been to work together with China while attacking allies and partners. The vision of an alternative approach with allies cannot be realized in theory, much less in practice.

The final concern about the Trump administration's written strategy lies in the president's unwillingness to be constrained by principled argument. In economic matters, the president took office with strong preconceptions at a tactical level: Bilateral deals were better than multilateral deals; the NAFTA and the Trans-Pacific Partnership were terrible; and China was cheating. To date, these tactical impulses have overwhelmed strategic considerations.

The real test of the new *National Security Strategy* from an economic perspective will not be whether the strategies are feasible, but whether the embedded principles can

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<sup>110</sup> Phil Levy, "NAFTA Isn't Dead Yet, but Trump's Vision of One-On-One Trade Deals May Be," *Forbes*, October 17, 2017, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/phillevy/2017/10/17/die-another-day-nafta-pauses-and-the-world-waits/-1ffcdddc5cd1>.

<sup>111</sup> U.S. Constitution, art. I, § 8, retrieved December 21, 2017, [https://www.usconstitution.net/xconst\\_A1Sec8.html](https://www.usconstitution.net/xconst_A1Sec8.html).

successfully be invoked to temper some of the President's more destructive urges. If so, the exercise will have been worthwhile.

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## 7. The National Security Strategy and a Return to the Golden Age of Spycraft

Carmen Medina

President Donald Trump’s new *National Security Strategy*<sup>112</sup> should come as no surprise to the CIA and the rest of the intelligence community. If the interagency process had worked as it should, the intelligence community would have had a substantial role in drafting and coordinating the document. Most of this work would have fallen to the offices of the director of national intelligence, including the National Intelligence Council, but the CIA would have had an official coordinating responsibility.

I suspect the CIA would have liked much of what it saw in the *National Security Strategy*. The document is a fine example of what I like to think of as the CIA’s “house ideology”—the world is a dangerous place full of enemies out to get the United States. I was in the CIA when the Cold War ended and witnessed its struggles to validate its mission once the Soviet Union had fallen. Former CIA Director James Woolsey’s observation that, having slayed the dragon, the United States now faced a jungle full of poisonous snakes was a clever reframing of the house ideology.<sup>113</sup> Of course, the rise of Al Qaeda and ISIL soon eliminated the need for CIA directors to deal in metaphors.

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<sup>112</sup> The White House, *The National Security Strategy of the United States*, December, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

<sup>113</sup> Douglas Jehl, “C.I.A. Nominee Wary of Budget Cuts,” *New York Times*, February 3, 1993, <http://www.nytimes.com/1993/02/03/us/cia-nominee-wary-of-budget-cuts.html>.

This *National Security Strategy* differs markedly from those of previous administrations with its emphasis on American greatness and on preserving the “American Way of Life.” By my count, that phrase appears 15 times in the current *National Security Strategy*, compared to no mentions in the 2015 strategy.<sup>114</sup> The 2017 policy goals tend to shift the weight of the strategy toward economic issues: competitiveness, better trade deals, and maintaining the U.S. technology edge. As far as the CIA is concerned, this emphasis, in my view, may not play to its strengths.

Economic intelligence has a problematic history in the intelligence community. When China and the Soviet Union were closed economies, CIA officers developed bespoke techniques to figure out their economic strength and productivity. There are still unknowns in the Chinese and Russian economies today, but economic analysts in the intelligence community generally rely on the same types of open source information used by financial analysts everywhere. This will make it that much harder for economic intelligence to differentiate itself from other, more easily-accessible financial analyses. Providing enough value-added on international economic issues will likely be a challenge as CIA seeks to satiate the Trump administration’s likely hunger for actionable intelligence.

The CIA’s recent reorganization is another complicating factor. The analytic component of the agency has long struggled with how best to organize for its mission. Is it better to organize by geographical region or by disciplines, such as economic, military, and political? Geographically-based units tend to match better with how policymakers are deployed but niche experts such as economists or technologists can get lost in a unit

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<sup>114</sup> The White House, *The National Security Strategy of the United States*, February, 2015,

[https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2015\\_national\\_security\\_strategy\\_2.pdf](https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2015_national_security_strategy_2.pdf).

dominated by military or political experts. Now that the CIA is organized by mission centers, uniting collectors and analysts, it may prove even harder to give economic intelligence its due. I wouldn't be surprised if the CIA decided in the near future to reestablish a separate unit devoted to economic intelligence.

Two other interesting aspects of the *National Security Strategy* as it relates to intelligence are worth mentioning. First, the document notes that the intelligence community must, “continuously pursue strategic intelligence to anticipate geostrategic shifts.” I did not find the phrase “strategic intelligence” in the *National Security Strategy* from 2015. I, for one, welcome calling out the need for over-the-horizon intelligence and hope the CIA and the rest of the intelligence community heed this call. There is no more important responsibility for intelligence analysts than to help policymakers anticipate future challenges *and* opportunities. As the pace of change accelerates, the need becomes ever greater to think hard about how individual trends can combine to create unsettling new realities.

Second, the *National Security Strategy* also contains an intriguing nod to the value of open-source information. In a section entitled “Harness all Information at our Disposal,” the strategy calls upon the United States to, “use the information-rich open-source environment to deny the ability of state and non-state actors to attack our citizens.” The language is unclear, but the discussion of intelligence sources and methods is nevertheless striking. The next paragraph calls for the United States to, “fuse information and analysis to compete more effectively on the geopolitical stage.” It seems clear that the Trump administration finds something lacking in current intelligence efforts.

Finally, the document makes clear that the world is essentially an arena for competition among sovereign nation-states. Unlike the Obama administration's *National Security Strategy*, there is no section devoted to the international order or a discussion of the emergence of mega-cities. The Trump administration's traditional orientation will be music to the ears of intelligence officers who enjoy competing against the intelligence services of other nation-states. It promises a return to the golden age of spycraft, not just for the United States, but for all our peer competitors.

*Carmen Medina is a former deputy director of intelligence for the CIA. During her 32 years at the CIA, she was known as a contrarian and as an advocate of intelligence reform.*



## 8. The National Security Strategy's Implications for Seapower

Bryan McGrath

The 2017 *National Security Strategy*<sup>115</sup> released Monday is a statement of Trump administration priorities, and its central tenets can be directly traced to statements made by Donald Trump on the campaign trail, albeit now framed in more genteel terms. National security experts are busily analyzing the strategy to discern its insights, pivots, oversights, inconsistencies, and priorities. This essay, however, concerns itself solely with the strategy's implications for American seapower.

Seapower advocates have long made the case for freedom of the seas and the security and prosperity benefits that such freedom provides. The strategy comes out of the blocks strong on this front, stating, "Americans have long recognized the benefits of an interconnected world, where information and commerce flow freely" (p. 7). But this recognition is quickly qualified:

Engaging with the world, however, does not mean the United States should abandon its rights and duties as a sovereign state or compromise its security. Openness also imposes costs, since adversaries exploit our free and democratic system to harm the United States.

Here we find the fundamental tension between worldwide freedom of the seas (provided by globally deployed American seapower), and the Trump administration's view that the

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<sup>115</sup> The White House, *The National Security Strategy of the United States*, December, 2017,

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

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<https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-make-trumps-national-security-strategy/>



United States is often taken advantage of, a tension that is never satisfactorily resolved in the document.

## Where the U.S. Navy Is Going and Why

The document outlines U.S. strategy region-by-region: In the Indo-Pacific, the strategy is decidedly forward-leaning, with assurances not only of robust and powerful forward-deployed U.S. forces, but of cooperation, the importance of alliances, and the need to help build partner capacity. Not so in Europe. Our NATO allies are again reminded of their political commitments on defense spending even after a sober discussion of the multiple threats posed by Russia. A Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments study released earlier this year (and summarized in *War on the Rocks*<sup>116</sup>) entitled *Restoring American Seapower: A New Fleet Architecture for the United States Navy*<sup>117</sup> showed conclusively, that a navy the size of that advocated by the president in his campaign (350 ships) is warranted only if the Navy returns to Europe in force, with routine presence in both the Mediterranean and the approaches to Northern Europe. This document would have been a useful place to lay the groundwork for that return.

In the Middle East, the importance of forward-deployed power is reinforced without reference to the capability of our friends and allies there to provide it for themselves.

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<sup>116</sup> Bryan Clark and Bryan McGrath, “A Guide to the Fleet the United States Needs,” *War on the Rocks*, February 10, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/02/a-guide-to-the-fleet-the-united-states-needs/>.

<sup>117</sup> Bryan Clark, Peter Haynes, Bryan McGrath, Craig Hooper, Jesse Sloman, and Timothy A. Walton, “Restoring American Seapower: A New Fleet Architecture for the United States Navy,” Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, February 9, 2017, <http://csbaonline.org/research/publications/restoring-american-seapower-a-new-fleet-architecture-for-the-united-states->.

South and Central Asia are handled separately from the Indo-Pacific, perhaps due to the abidingly continental nature of the former and the maritime nature of the latter. Thus, there is little in the South and Central Asia section that relates to seapower. In the Western Hemisphere, the failure to mention the role of the Coast Guard (except by inference) is notable. In Africa, the ability to support counter-terrorism forces from the sea is, similarly, inferred.

While the strategy document acknowledges that a strong economy “protects the American people, supports our way of life, and sustains American power,” it does not offer any substantial discussion of how military power works to protect and sustain economic prosperity. Yet, no other aspect of military power is as closely connected with prosperity. This symbiotic relationship between seapower and prosperity was bluntly stated centuries ago by Sir Walter Raleigh<sup>118</sup>:

[W]hosoever commands the sea commands the trade; whosoever commands the trade of the world commands the riches of the world, and consequently the world itself.

American seapower apostle Alfred Thayer Mahan packaged this view more diplomatically for statesmen in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, though no less emphatically.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Sir Walter Raleigh, “A Discourse of the Invention of Ships, Anchors, Compass, &c.,” *The Works of Sir Walter Raleigh*, vol. 8, (1829, reprinted 1965), 325.

<sup>119</sup> Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History, 1660–1783* (1890; repr., New York: Dover Publications, 1987).

No such emphasis is to be found in this document. Instead, seapower is simply treated as one of several instruments of military power that must be better resourced without any indication of priority. Meanwhile, a number of familiar campaign themes manifest themselves in the *National Security Strategy's* prescriptions for promoting prosperity (fair trade deals, improving infrastructure, and reducing regulatory burdens) without much consideration of that which provides for the movement of 90 percent of world trade: freedom of the seas underwritten by dominant American seapower.<sup>120</sup>

### **A New Era of Great Power Competition on the Seas**

Although the document fails to discuss the unique peacetime, regulatory functions performed by globally postured American seapower and their impact on prosperity (not to mention the force structure required to perform these functions), it does reveal the Trump administration's reasons for calling for a military buildup: to prevent and prepare for war with China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea, and to conduct ongoing operations against jihadist terrorists. It is a compelling case, such as it is, and it provides some hopeful signs for those advocating for dominant American seapower.

The strategy recognizes that we have entered a new age of great power competition. Calling out China and Russia is helpful because it not only identifies the threats that U.S. forces will likely face, but it also suggests a range of military objectives against which these nations might move. Understanding threat and objectives helps military planners

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<sup>120</sup> "International Maritime Organization Profile," UN-Business Action Hub, accessed December 20, 2017, <https://business.un.org/en/entities/13>.

determine the right size (capacity) and mix (capability) of the force. One statement, in particular, resonates:

China seeks to displace the United States in the Indo-Pacific region, expand the reaches of its state-driven economic model, and reorder the region in its favor (p. 25).

Displacing the United States in the Indo-Pacific region is no mean task, and the military component of this Chinese objective is abidingly maritime in nature. If it is indeed the desire of the United States *not* to be displaced, American seapower will have to shoulder a disproportionate share of the load. The language regarding the Russian threat is equally strong, and makes clear to national security planners that Europe is once again a theater of concern after several decades of relative peace.

#### *A New Deterrence Posture*

The document introduces a sophisticated argument for a new conventional deterrence posture that has significant implications for American seapower:

We must convince adversaries that we can and will defeat them—not just punish them if they attack the United States. We must ensure the ability to deter potential enemies by denial, convincing them that they cannot accomplish objectives through the use of force or other forms of aggression (p.28).

This shift from an emphasis of deterrence by punishment to one that stresses denial of enemy objectives echoes the central theme of the CSBA report mentioned above. This study was conducted in response to tasking in the 2016 National Defense Authorization Act directing the Defense Department to commission a series of reports on alternative fleet architectures. The CSBA report was unique among the three studies<sup>121</sup> in that the entire fleet architecture was built around a central proposition: that the current approach to conventional deterrence would be ineffective against the numerous, important — but limited — military objectives available to China and Russia in their near abroad. In other words, the threat of punishment would be insufficient to deter, and the ability of U.S. forces in the region to deny or delay aggression must be increased in order to raise the costs of aggression.

This is not a subtle shift. In fact, deterrence by denial demands the availability of nearby force that can be employed quickly and lethally, a primary attribute of forward-deployed American seapower. The CSBA's architecture provides an option for a more muscular conventional deterrent against not only China and Russia, but also Iran and North Korea.

## Growing the U.S. Fleet

The *National Security Strategy* also makes it clear that when it comes to military force, size matters. Criticizing previous administrations, the strategy states:

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<sup>121</sup> “Statement by SASC Chairman John McCain on U.S. Navy Fleet Architecture Studies,” Senate Office of John McCain, February 10, 2017, <https://www.mccain.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/2017/2/statement-by-sasc-chairman-john-mccain-on-u-s-navy-fleet-architectuture-studies>.

We also incorrectly believed that technology could compensate for our reduced capacity — for the ability to field enough forces to prevail militarily, consolidate our gains, and achieve our desired political ends. We convinced ourselves that all wars would be fought and won quickly, from stand-off distances and with minimal casualties (p. 27).

Critics of growing the U.S. fleet have for years fallen back on the notion that, because individual ships are more capable today than ships in the past, fewer of them are needed. The strategy strikes a blow against the false choice of “capacity vs. capability,” advocating that both are important. Whether both are important across the spectrum of military power is an open question.

The strategy states that, “The Joint Force must remain capable of deterring and defeating the full range of threats to the United States” (p. 29). At first glance, the statement seems unobjectionable. Of course U.S. forces must be capable of deterring and defeating the full range of threats. That said, it could also provide cover to avoid making hard choices and answering tough questions: Are all threats equally dangerous and proximate? Must we be equally capable of deterring and defeating all of them simultaneously? The answer to these questions is “of course not.”

The strategy also discusses the importance of strategic nuclear forces and nuclear deterrence, a crucial topic as the nation considers the considerable cost of modernizing and operating its nuclear triad.<sup>122</sup> Coming as it does after an earlier insightful discussion of conventional deterrence and what is necessary to deter by denial rather than from

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<sup>122</sup> Congressional Budget Office, “Approaches for Managing the Costs of U.S. Nuclear Forces, 2017 to 2046,” October 31, 2017, <https://www.cbo.gov/publication/53211>.

punishment, this emphasis on strategic deterrence raises the question of cost and priority. Interestingly, within the Navy, there appears to be no question of priority. The chief of naval operations Adm. John Richardson has repeatedly stated that recapitalizing the nation's fleet of ballistic missile capable submarines is his top acquisition priority.<sup>123</sup>

However, this priority of strategic deterrence over conventional deterrence is being called into question. Earlier this week, my colleague Seth Cropsey and I released a Hudson Institute Center for American Seapower monograph entitled *Maritime Strategy in a New Era of Great Power Competition*.<sup>124</sup> In it, we argue

for a new theory of deterrence, one that revises the Cold War approach in which the Soviet Union was deterred from large-scale conventional attack by the threat of nuclear escalation. Under that rubric, one could justifiably say that America's conventional deterrent was dependent on its strategic deterrent. Today, the decapitating "bolt from the blue" strike is even more remote than it was in the Cold War, and to the extent that nuclear exchange between great powers is conceivable, it is far more likely to flow from conventional conflict that has gone awry. Therefore, to deter nuclear war, we must deter conventional war. No aspect of American military power will be more critical to deterring either nuclear or conventional super-power war than seapower.

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<sup>123</sup> Jon Harper, "Cost of New Submarine Could Threaten Navy Fleet Expansion," *National Defense*, March 22, 2017, <http://www.nationaldefensemagazine.org/articles/2017/3/22/cost-of-new-submarine-could-threaten-navy-fleet-expansion>.

<sup>124</sup> Seth Cropsey and Bryan McGrath, *Maritime Strategy in a New Era of Great Power Competition* (Washington D.C.: Hudson Institute, 2018).

By this reckoning and the administration's rightful emphasis on a new theory of conventional deterrence, care must be taken to ensure that the modernization of strategic nuclear forces does not unduly crowd out resources more wisely applied to conventional capabilities.

Historically speaking, one of the nation's most useful tools for exerting its influence around the world has been its fleet. The fleet reminds allies that we are engaged, warns potential aggressors that we have interests we will protect, and provides the capability to support diplomacy and development along the coastlines, where the vast majority of the world's population lives. Yet, these attributes are virtually ignored by the strategy document to its detriment.

## Conclusion

While aiming to offer a sober assessment of the 2017 *National Security Strategy* on American seapower, I share the reservations Dan Drezner expressed Tuesday in a *Washington Post* article, in which he lays bare the many contradictions between the content of the strategy and the words and publicly expressed views of the president who signed it.<sup>125</sup> Nowhere was this disconnect more obvious to me than in the president's one-and-a-half-page introductory letter. In it, North Korea, Iran, and ISIL are called out by name, but Russia and China are only referred to vaguely as "...undermining American interests around the globe." This is in stark contrast to the substance of the strategy, in

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<sup>125</sup> Daniel W. Drezner, "A Straussian National Security Strategy," *Washington Post*, December 19, 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/posteverything/wp/2017/12/19/a-straussian-national-security-strategy/?utm\\_term=.700b1e045edo](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/posteverything/wp/2017/12/19/a-straussian-national-security-strategy/?utm_term=.700b1e045edo)



which both nations are named and shamed for their depredations upon U.S. interests, the international system, and their neighbors.

If the people of this nation are to be convinced to rebuild the nation's military strength, they are going to have to be persuaded by the leadership of the president. Few Americans will actually read the president's strategy, but most are open to his influence. As long as he continues to soft-peddle the threat posed by the revisionist regimes in Moscow and Beijing, and so long as he continues to warmly embrace their authoritarian leaders, the massive contradiction between him and his National Security Strategy will remain, and the military buildup will not be achieved.

The *National Security Strategy* tells a realistic story. It would be nice if the president agreed with it.

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## 9. An Airman's View of the New National Security Strategy

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The new *National Security Strategy*<sup>126</sup> is a well-written treatise that appropriately embraces a “whole of government approach” to meeting the nation’s global security needs. Henry Kissinger famously said that, “The attempt to separate diplomacy and power results in power lacking direction and diplomacy being deprived of incentives.”<sup>127</sup> However, the bottom line is that the U.S. military is the backbone of our national security strategy. Thus, it is heartening to see that the Trump administration’s new *National Security Strategy* contains the best of Ronald Reagan’s strategy of peace through strength.

A combination of U.S. national security interests combined with a challenging threat environment demands that our military must be the best-trained, best-led, best-armed, and most capable armed force in the world. Failing to do this will see the United States at risk, with adversaries becoming ever-more aggressive at the cost of global stability. This is not an academic proposition. The U.S. military advantage in terms of capabilities and capacity relative to potential threats around the world has been shrinking. Aggression in the South China Sea, an increasingly belligerent North Korea and Iran, a resurgent Russia, and numerous other developments can be traced back to an erosion of U.S. power. Competing states realize America faces major military capacity and capability challenges

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<sup>126</sup> <sup>126</sup> The White House, *The National Security Strategy of the United States*, December, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

<sup>127</sup> Henry Kissinger, “Withdrawal is not an Option,” *International Herald Tribune*, January 18, 2007, <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/KissingerTestimony070131.pdf>.

and are eager to advance their interest in the resulting void. This situation must be reversed.

Conventional deterrence is achieved by possessing the capability to win a fight 99 to 1. While building a force to win 51 to 49 may be less expensive in the short term, the higher potential of conflict it engenders will result in enormously greater costs in the long term. If you think maintaining the peace is expensive, consider the expense of war. Look at the result of the past 17 years of continual combat: over one trillion dollars expended, thousands of lives lost, and tremendous positive potential ceded due to decisions that confused the number of boots on the ground with strategy.

Military requirements should be set at levels necessary to support the fundamental tenets of America's national security strategy, as opposed to allowing arbitrary budget restrictions drive our national security strategy. In this regard, it would be wise to recall the astute words of Sir John Slessor:

It is customary in democratic countries to deplore expenditure on armaments as conflicting with the requirements of the social services. There is a tendency to forget that the most important social service a government can do for its people is to keep them alive and free.<sup>128</sup>

There are three enduring tenets of our national security strategies over the years that have served the United States well: First, maintain sufficient military forces and capabilities to engage around the world to encourage peace and stability. Second, in the

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<sup>128</sup> Sir John Cotesworth Slessor, *Strategy for the West* (New York: Morrow and Company, 1954), 75.

event of a necessary confrontation, ensure the fight happens away from U.S. territory in a fashion that puts the enemy's centers of gravity at risk. And finally, be able to win more than one major regional conflict at a time. To accomplish these, the United States needs a set of robust, capable, and ready forces with a rotational base sufficient to sustain operations.

So, let's cut to the chase. As well stated in the new *National Security Strategy*, the government of the United States has for too long underfunded its military. As Sen. John McCain said even before the new *National Security Strategy* was released, the U.S. military is — in addition to being underfunded — undersized and unready. It is now incumbent upon President Donald Trump to set budget guidelines that meet the challenges that he has so well outlined in his new *National Security Strategy*. The world is on fire and the proposed increases to the current defense budget are not even close to meeting those challenges. In fact, the funding is only fractionally higher than Obama's budget extended.

While all the services are under-resourced, some need attention ahead of others. Among all the armed forces, the Air Force has been the hardest hit by the past 25 years of underfunding. As a result, today it has the oldest weapon systems, is the smallest, and it is the least ready it has ever been *in its entire history*. Unlike the other services, the Air Force has been at war without a break since January 1991, not just since September 11, 2011. The Air Force has not had a break from constant combat for over 26 years.

The Air Force has become the indispensable force in the conduct of military operations. No U.S. military operation can be conducted successfully without the U.S. Air Force because it provides the global vigilance, global reach, and global power that all joint

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commands require to succeed. It also presents leaders options that are vital when seeking to project effective, prudent power — especially when it comes to avoiding unnecessary wars of occupation. However, today the Air Force is operating a geriatric force that is becoming more so every day — bombers and tankers over 50 years of age, trainers over 40, and fighters and helicopters over 30. For comparison purposes the average age of the U.S. airline fleet is about 10 years — and they don't stress their aircraft by operating them at 6 to 9 times the force of gravity on a daily basis, as do our fighters. If World War II-era B-17s had flown in Desert Storm, they'd have been younger than the B-52s and tankers we are using in contingency operations today.

During Operation Desert Storm — America's last quick and decisive victory — the Air Force had 134 fighter squadrons. Today it has 55. That is a 60 percent reduction in forces. Thirty-eight fighter squadrons participated in Desert Storm — 70 percent of today's total. Desert Storm was one major regional conflict in a world and against a threat far less complex than those we face today.

Today, thanks to Congressional underfunding, less than 50 percent of the Air Force is ready to fight tonight. Part of the Air Force plan regarding readiness is to move from where it is today at 320,000, to 350,000 people over seven years. That will only get us to what the Air Force manning requirements are for *today*, much less to set the conditions for the improved readiness across the Air Force — in all mission areas — necessary to match the demands called for in the new *National Security Strategy*.

To consider the real impact of the shortfall, it is worth looking at the security demand signal. The scale and scope of the challenge can best be appreciated by considering the global environment at the turn of the century in 2000. Russia and China were not

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aggressively seeking to dominate their respective regions through overt power projection. The present flavor of terrorism had yet to manifest itself in a large scale. The threat posed by Iran and North Korea was nowhere near the scale of the present set of concerns. Regions like the Arctic were not on the minds of Pentagon leaders. And cyberspace was in nascent form. While operations like those undertaken in Iraq, Somalia, Bosnia, and Kosovo were not without their unique challenges, the security environment looked quaint from a comparative perspective. While the world was by no means a safe place 18 years ago, it did not pose the number and variety of serious threats — many existential in nature — seen in today’s security environment.

The security environment facing the United States fundamentally shifted with the attacks of September 11, 2001. American forces engaged in a broad array of operations, with efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq standing as the most visible activities. This period also saw the often-underappreciated rise of nation states with interest directly opposed to those of the United States: a resurgent Russia, an aggressive China, and the nuclear threat posed by Iran and North Korea.

Seventeen years later, the United States Air Force now finds itself stretched thin trying to manage a challenging set of threats around the globe with much fewer resources than it possessed in less challenging times.

The Air Force requires serious recapitalization — bombers, fighters, trainers, surveillance aircraft — but not just aircraft. The Air Force’s intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) force is over 40 years old. Nuclear forces need modernization. Intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance forces are growing in demand. Additional Air Force space assets are essential to providing a global utility in the form of GPS, critical communications, and

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satellites must be modernized to survive modern threats. Finally, there is the growing demand for cyber-warriors and associated capabilities.

Rebuilding the geriatric U.S. Air Force to meet the demands of the new strategy will be expensive, but the only thing more expensive than a first-rate air force is a second-rate air force. With a first-rate air force, we deter conflict. With a second-rate air force, we encourage conflict, and to a growing degree, risk failure. War is the most costly and wasteful of endeavors so it is best to actualize the tenets ensconced in the new strategy to achieve peace through strength — or Washington needs to change its expectations.

The first responsibility of the United States government is the security of the American people. As the preamble of the Constitution states, the government was established to “provide for the common defense,” and subsequently to “promote the general welfare.” Congressional decisions have confused this prioritization, with the Budget Control Act of 2011 taxing defense spending at a rate greater than twice its percentage of the total federal budget.

The release of the new *National Security Strategy* has given the United States an opportunity to return to first principles and get our priorities straight. For too many years, arbitrary spending limits have decided U.S. military force structure when it should have been determined by the national security strategy. As a result, prior administrations and Congresses have created a growing strategy-resource mismatch.

Having issued a well-designed *National Security Strategy*, the Trump administration now needs to work with Congress to resource our military, economic, information, and diplomatic arms to execute it and assure its success against any foreseeable adversary,

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but more importantly, with the necessary levels of capacity and capability that will deter any adversary from initiating conflict in the first place. If the United States wants to avoid future conflict and maintain key interests around the globe, the price of those aims is a fully resourced strategy.

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