



Donald Trump and “America first”: the road ahead is open

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Abstract

The paper asks why and how it was possible to redesign established positions and priorities of US foreign policy during the first 2 years of Donald Trump’s presidency. The paper applies a neo-classical realist foreign policy framework focusing on four variables: the perceptions of the foreign policy executive, the strategic culture of the USA, state–society relations in the Trump era and finally the role of domestic government institutions. The paper concludes that the Trump administration after 2 and a half years in power had removed a number of obstacles to pursue a unilateral foreign policy placing America first. Trump and his administration were able to present, announce and launch a remarkable number of policy initiatives breaking with established foreign policy priorities of the USA. Not all announced policies were implemented by the mid-2019. But, the road ahead was open.

Keywords Donald Trump · Polarization · John Bolton · The “Blob” · US security politics

Introduction

The rise of Donald Trump to power as the 45th president of the USA, his tweets and his many surprising foreign policy initiatives have caused a lot of international confusion and have shocked friends and allies. Among US international relations scholars, the outcry and concerns over president Trump have been pronounced. John Ikenberry claims that “for the first time since the 1930s, the United States has elected a president who is actively hostile to liberal internationalism.” The “liberal international order is in crisis” (Ikenberry 2018: 7). Liberal political scientist Joseph Nye has stated “I am not worried by the rise of China. I am more worried by the rise of Trump” (Allison 2018: 124f). The liberal international order has been organized around economic openness, multilateral institutions and security cooperation where Western Europe and Japan have been the key partners of the USA (Ikenberry 2018:

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7ff). The American leading role has been built on alliances that to a large extent have brought about international stability (Ikenberry 2018: 7ff).

The uproar over Donald Trump and his behavior makes two observations suitable. First, Trump and his policy initiatives may not be as unique as his critics seem to suggest. When George W. Bush took office in 2001, he was not only prepared to reject established rules for international behavior. The new Bush team was also ready and willing to bring about dramatic foreign policy outcomes that it alone desired (Cox and Stokes 2008: 1–2). George W. Bush “did not seem at all averse to proclaiming in a most ‘American first’ way that the United States would no longer be constrained by international institutions, international law and international opinion,” it is argued by Cox and Stokes (2008: 2).

Second, the American political system is built on the idea of “check and balance” including check and balance of the president’s conduct of foreign policy (Lowi et al. 2014: 186–203). However, there seems to be widespread agreement that during the past decades, congressional check and balance of the presidential powers in foreign policy have decreased significantly. Constraints on the presidents have eroded, and therefore, decision-making on foreign policy has increasingly been centralized in the White House (Goldgeier and Saunders 2018; Lowi et al. 2014: 186ff). Therefore, there are very few constitutional constraints as well as non-constitutional constraints on Donald Trump and his possibilities for pursuing more or less clearly defined foreign policy goals.

In brief, the situation under Donald Trump is not so unique or so different from what was the case during the George W. Bush years though it seems as if the checks and balances are much weaker in recent years than they were during the Bush years. According to John Lewis Gaddis, the lack of national and international constraints resulted in George W. Bush Jr. presiding over the “most sweeping redesign of US grand strategy since Franklin D. Roosevelt” (Gaddis 2005: 1). The “redesign” included the launch of several wars like Afghanistan and Iraq. Based on non-random examples, the statements by president Donald Trump during the July 2018 NATO summit, the subsequent meeting between the American president and Vladimir Putin and not least the statement by the president that the European Union was a “foe” of the USA seem to indicate that Trump was seeking to redesign American foreign policy. Based on the same examples, Susan B. Glasser argued that the Trump administration was “breaking down American foreign policy” (Glasser 2018: 4). In brief, as far as the years 2017, 2018 and the first half of 2019 were concerned, Donald Trump’s behavior points toward an assessment of his presidency that Trump was actually “redesigning” American foreign policy (Contiguglia 2018).

It is puzzling that Donald Trump after 30 months in the White House was in a position to “redesign” or “break down” the preceding foreign policy positions of the USA. Concretely, the paper asks why and how it was possible for Donald Trump to break with the prevailing priorities and positions that have characterized American foreign policy for the past 70 years. According to John Ikenberry, the American foreign policy during these years prioritized free trade, alliances and multilateralism as well as international law, elements that were crucial to developing the so-called liberal international order (Ikenberry 2018). The paper only asks why and how the Trump administration after only two and a half years in power was able to



“redesign” or “break down” what had been prevailing foreign policy priorities of the USA for almost 70 years. It does not seek to assess if and to what degree Donald Trump and his administration was successful in implementing fundamental changes of American foreign policy during its first 2 years in power.

The theoretical framework applied in the paper, neo-classical realism, not only contributed to structure the paper. It also inspired the formulation of four explanatory hypotheses addressing the core question. The following section starts by scrutinizing the perceptions and beliefs of the so-called “foreign policy executive” in Washington, with the aim to answer why Donald Trump launched his many surprising foreign policy initiatives. The second section addresses the question whether it has been possible for the Trump administration to change the strategic culture and the grand strategy that have framed foreign policy making in the USA for decades. The third section analyzes current state–society relations, and in particular, it focuses on the polarization of the American political system and its consequences for foreign policy decision-making in Washington with the aim to answer if these phenomena have contributed to the redesigning of US foreign policy. The fourth section addresses the role of the most relevant domestic institutions involved in foreign policy making in the USA with the aim to scrutinize their role in the Trump administration’s attempts to redirect American foreign policy. As a start, core elements of the theoretical framework are presented in the following section.

The theoretical framework

The argument of the paper addresses a classical foreign policy issue. There exists a number of theories on American foreign policy. On the one hand, the systemic theories accentuate the significance of external factors or the importance of international systemic factors and focus on the concrete behavior as a response to external pressure (Schmidt 2008: 10–13). On the other hand, there are theories that emphasize internal or domestic factor in order to explain the foreign policy of the US building on the assumption that domestic factor is the most important in relation to explaining American foreign policy (Schmidt 2008: 13–17).

The paper applies neo-classical realism as framework for the analysis (Ripsman et al. 2016). The framework is also inspired by reflections found in the FPA frameworks presented by Hill (2016) and Alden and Aran (2017). The framework applied here falls within the second strand of theories on US foreign policy as it pays special attention to the domestic circumstances that form part of the background to decision-making (Ripsman et al. 2016; Hill 2016; Alden and Aran 2017). As the focus of the paper is on the consequences of the first 2 years of Donald Trump’s presidency, the neo-classical realist framework is considered helpful as it contributes to turning the analytical attention to the motives and interests of the core actors and agencies involved in foreign policy making. The framework is pluralist in its orientation maintaining that the state or the government is not a single and coherent actor capable of pursuing a clear-cut national interest in a rational manner (Hill 2016: 7–9). The pluralist position implies that actual foreign policy behavior may appear both incoherent and inconsistent (Ripsman et al. 2016; Hill 12–17).



The theoretical framework applied here maintains that the international systemic conditions are filtered and interpreted via four domestic intervening variables (Ripsman et al. 2016: 58–79; Rose 1998: 157ff). Phrased differently, the international systemic factors are the independent variable, whereas the domestic variables are the intervening variables assumed to explain why and not least how Donald Trump was able to launch the many surprising policy initiatives during his first 2 years in office. The intervening variables are “images and perceptions of state leaders,” “strategic culture,” “state-society relations” and “domestic institutional arrangements” (Ripsman et al. 2016: 59ff).

The first intervening variable refers to the beliefs and perceptions of the individual decision-maker at the helm of the state (Ripsman et al. 2016: 61ff; Rose 1998: 157ff). Beliefs and perceptions are important because they are supposed to lead to political actions. Sometimes, the variable is referred to as the role of personality and leadership in foreign policy decision-making (Hill 2016: 81ff, 65ff; Alden and Aran 2017: 28ff). No doubt, it is appropriate to broaden the understanding of the individuals making foreign policy decisions on his or her own and talk more broadly about the “foreign policy executive” as it is suggested by Hill (2016: 62ff) and Ripsman et al. (2016: 61).

The second intervening variable is the “strategic culture” that refers to “deeply embedded conceptions and notions of national security.” In the analysis here, it is helpful to operate with the concept “grand strategy” that has a number of similarities with the concept “strategic culture” (Ripsman et al. 2016: 69) albeit is more specific in its listing of basic foreign policy priorities. Both concepts build on a strong historical component and are thus path dependent (Silove 2018: 31–32). The strategic culture as well as the grand strategy is assumed to shape the strategic understanding of political leaders, societal elites and even the general public. Through socialization and institutionalization, the strategic culture and the grand strategy is supposed to constrain a state’s behavior and its freedom of action (Ripsman et al. 2016: 67).

The third intervening variable refers to the characteristics of state–society relations that can have significant impact on the foreign policy behavior of a state. A key element relates to the degree of harmony or lack of harmony between government and society, and thereby, the level of support for the general foreign policy and national security objectives that are contained in the strategic culture of the country (Ripsman et al. 2016: 71). The increasing level of polarization within the American society and not least within the political system is supposed to have particular impact in an open system like the American described as “society centered” (Alden and Aran 2017: 67). The openness of the political system emphasizes the importance of accessibility and potential influence of societal actors such as civil society groups, NGOs, lobby groups and different types of economic interest groups (Hill 2016: 277–282; Alden and Aran 2017: 71ff, 63ff).

Finally, domestic government institutions are considered an important intervening variable (Ripsman et al. 2016: 75ff) as they not only participate in making foreign policy decisions, but are crucial when it comes to implementing decisions. By giving up the assumption of states as coherent and rational actors, the theoretical framework introduces the possibility that different government institutions may pursue their own specific interests and goals in foreign policy. Often, foreign ministries



are confronted with a number of “rivals” among government agencies. At this stage, Christopher Hill suggests bringing in the classical theory of “bureaucratic politics” (Hill 2016: 102–109) as the idea of bureaucratic policy making has important implications for a study of foreign policy. Moreover, it is also opening up analytically to decision-making being both irrational and inconsistent because each government institution may pursue its own narrow interests (Hill 2016: 102).

Data and methodological reflections

Because the focus of the paper is on recent events, recent decisions and statements, much of the data used in the following analysis are of journalistic nature, whereas the number of scholarly works used is limited. It has to be mentioned that some of the data in the paper and a lot of inspiration were collected during a research stay at “The Josef Korbel School for International Studies,” Denver University, Colorado from March through to August 2018.

The neo-classical realist-cum-FPA framework is considered a “model” implying that the framework mainly points at the supposedly most important variables concretely the four intervening variables mentioned above. However, the individual variable does not necessarily produce explanations per se. Therefore, the paper formulates explanatory hypotheses linked to each of the four intervening variables. The hypotheses are used to focus the four sub-analyses that both individually and together produce possible explanations to the how question of the paper.

The first of the explanatory hypotheses states that the beliefs and perceptions of the “foreign policy executive” are important and maybe even crucial for understanding why—but not how—many of Donald Trump’s foreign policy declarations and decisions were made. The second explanatory hypothesis states that Donald Trump is strongly inspired by the isolationist thinking of Andrew Jackson and apparently, the Trump administration was successful in pushing its foreign policy vision and thereby contributing to a shift in the strategic culture and the grand strategy of the USA. Thereby, Donald Trump and his close associates went down the avenue “breaking down American foreign policy” as argued by Susan Glasser.

The third explanatory hypothesis states that there is a significant polarization of the American political system and of the American society as well as a deliberate marginalization of the bipartisan foreign policy elite in Washington. Together, these elements made it possible for Trump and his close associates to launch a number of partisan foreign policy initiatives that broke with the traditional US foreign policy priorities.

The fourth hypothesis states that Donald Trump, his two different foreign secretaries and the new National Security Advisor John Bolton jointly were able to reduce the influence of the State Department and of the Pentagon in foreign policy making. By marginalizing these two crucial government institutions, Donald Trump and his close associates John Bolton and Mike Pompeo made it possible to potentially either redesign or break down the existing foreign policy and its priorities. In brief, whereas the first two explanatory hypotheses mainly address the question of why the



Trump administration launched so many surprising foreign policy statements and initiatives, the last two hypotheses address the questions how this has been possible.

Perceptions of core foreign policy decision-makers

This section scrutinizes the perceptions of the American foreign policy executive in the Trump era with the aim to answer why the Trump administration launched so many sudden and unexpected foreign policy initiatives. For a long time, it was difficult to get a coherent idea of Donald Trump's personal perceptions of American foreign policy (Brands 2017: 14ff). However, in June 2018 Jeffrey Goldberg presented bits and pieces of what was described as the "Trump Doctrine." The main content of the doctrine and the goals and aims of US foreign policy were summarized into a belief of Trump that "the United States owes nothing to anyone—especially its allies" (Goldberg 2018). The perception implies that the American president believes that 70 years of close transatlantic relations including the NATO alliance does not imply any kind of obligation for the USA toward Europe, not to mention toward the European Union. Neither do years of close cooperation lead to expectations of loyalty among the involved parties. A senior official summarized the Trump Doctrine in the following way: "No friends, no enemies" (Goldberg 2018).

The Trumpian worldview is based on three elements. First, the incumbent president dislikes America's military alliances that he considers harmful or a direct and existential threat to the USA. Allies tie town and exploit the USA with their free trade deals and military alliances and their unending expectations of preferential treatment. Consequently, decades of old friendships like the transatlantic alliance are not sacred to president Trump (Friedman 2018; Brands 2017–2018: 16ff). During his presidential campaign in 2016, Donald Trump raised questions about the relevance of the alliance after the end of the cold war (Brands 2017–2018: 16–18). He claimed that the USA was bearing too much of the burden for Europe's security. Second, Donald Trump firmly believes that the global economy is unfair to the USA and third, the president apparently has an innate sympathy for "authoritarian strongmen." As a consequence to the perception that alliances do the USA no good, Trump believes that keeping allies and adversaries permanently off-balance benefits the USA. Apparently, these perceptions can be boiled down to the statement "We are America, Bitch!" (Brands 2017–2018: 16–18). That can be translated into a general policy position implying that the USA should not bother with other nations, their interests or their points of view.

The combination of the above-mentioned values and Donald Trump's personal ideas leads Michael Clarke and Anthony Ricketts to argue that Donald Trump as president was coherent in following the foreign policy pledges he made on the campaign trail during 2016. He consistently focused on disconnecting America from the post-World War II international order that Trump believed had "ripped off" the American people. The president was consistent and coherent in adopting a unilateralist strategy stressing notions like "national honor" and "reputation" as integrated elements in his "America First" campaign. One of the core examples of the coherent unilateralist leanings of Donald Trump was his unwillingness to



endorse Article V of the NATO Treaty. Likewise, the withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement illustrated a surprising coherence between declarations made during the campaign in 2016 and policy initiatives implemented by the Trump administration and by the president himself (Clarke and Ricketts 2017: 373ff).

During the spring of 2018 Donald Trump recruited a new Secretary of State and a new National Security Advisor. The move was widely described as the president gathering people that would not contradict him nor his world view (personal interview with former State Department employee, Denver, May 4, 2018). The appointment of former CIA director Mike Pompeo to Secretary of State meant that a person who originally was elected to the House of Representatives on a Tea Party platform, came into the narrow foreign policy decision-making circles in Washington. Prior to his appointment, Pompeo had demonstrated a highly politicized approach to security and foreign policy as it became clear during the public hearings of Hillary Clinton for her role in the deaths of the embassy staff in Benghazi Libya (Hill 2018: 2). Mike Pompeo is described as a "staunch conservative" and a person loyal to the president's line on every policy issue from intelligence matters to the question of Russian interference in the 2016 election (Berman 2018).

The appointment of the foreign policy hardliner John Bolton to the job as National Security Advisor stressed the significance of political appointments based on strong ideological attitudes and statements. "Appointing a hardline figure like Bolton signals that Trump is ready to embrace a much more aggressive and volatile foreign policy," it was argued by Feldstein (2018). John Bolton had shown himself as a foreign policy hawk with a penchant for unilateralism (Hill 2018: 2).

John Bolton's worldview is characterized by a deep distrust in diplomacy to settle disputes. He was convinced that force and coercion were preferable to advance US interests and that force alone would ensure continued American dominance in the international system (Feldstein 2018). Bolton believes in unilateralism and is highly skeptical toward multilateralism. He is known as a long-standing critic of multilateral institutions like the United Nations, and he is the architect behind the proposal that voting in agreement or in disagreement in the UN should determine the amount of bilateral assistance from the USA (USGLC 2018). Bolton argued in public for preemptive strikes on Iran and North Korea and for pursuing regime change in both countries (Gramer 2018a, b, c; personal interview Denver, May 4 2018).

Finally, Defense Secretary General James Mattis was described as far more pragmatic and non-ideological compared to Pompeo and Bolton. Both Republicans and Democrats liked him and considered Mattis a stabilizing force in the administration and the president "appears to love Mattis" (Berman 2018: 6). On the other hand, it was highly disturbing to officials in the Defense Department that Trump continued to call into question the value of the NATO alliance and the possibility that the USA might withdraw from the transatlantic alliance (Mitchell 2018). The constant criticism of and the continued threats to the NATO alliance apparently forced military officers to reconsider their employment status and in particular it led them to consider resigning from the armed forces (interview with former Pentagon employee, 13 June 2018, Denver). By December 2018, James Mattis decided to resign his post. The reason given was his disagreements with the president on several issues



including the withdrawal of US troops from Syria and his rejection of international alliances (Cooper 2018).

In brief, the perceptions and attitudes shared by Donald Trump, Mike Pompeo and John Bolton were not favorable for maintaining a close trustful relationship between the European allies, other allies and the USA. The high level of agreement among the three men were particularly outspoken in relation to a number of controversial foreign policy steps like the withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, the withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal and the Trans-Pacific Trade Agreement (the TPP). The trade wars against the European Union and against China also reflected the strong nationalist and unilateralist views shared by the president, the secretary of state and the national security advisor.

However, the degree of agreement among the core decision-makers should not be overestimated. During the months with Mike Pompeo and John Bolton in office, there were a number of situations where the public learned about significant disagreements on specific policy issues. For example, disagreements between John Bolton and Donald Trump on how to handle Iran conflict during the confrontations between the two countries in the spring of 2019 became public knowledge. The two men also differed in their approach to the regime in North Korea. Here, the president stood alone in his view that Kim Jong-un was a honorable and trustworthy partner. Mike Pompeo also had serious disagreements with the president over the policy approach to both Iran and North Korea. The core of the disagreements can be boiled down to how tough the USA should approach North Korea and Iran and in case, how much military force should be applied. There were also disagreements between the three men when it came to the policy on Syria and Israel including the unilateral recognition of Israel's annexation of the Golan Heights (Glasser 2019; Kaplan 2019; Tercatin 2019; Borger 2019).

In spite of the disagreements and in spite of Trump's unpredictable policy changes that from time to time undercut the positions of John Bolton and Mike Pompeo, both men kept their positions as of mid-2019. The more or less public disagreements among the three core foreign policy decision makers may have resulted in an incoherent and unpredictable American foreign policy during the first 30 months of Donald Trump's presidency. However, the most serious consequence of Donald Trump's erratic foreign policy seems to have been a loss of American credibility in international affairs (Yarhi-Milo 2018; Bialik 2018; Cohen 2019: 142ff).

Strategic culture and grand strategy

The second explanatory hypothesis states that Donald Trump has been successful in dramatically shifting the strategic culture and the grand strategy of the USA pushing it in an isolationist direction. The strategic culture and the grand strategy are deeply embedded in path-dependent notions of national security leading Patrick Porter to conclude that the "fundamental security commitments have proven hard to change, even amid shocks" (Porter 2018: 9, 11). The most fundamental orientations in the American strategic culture are between isolationism and interventionism (Lee 2008: 269ff).



The grand strategy leaning toward the interventionist orientation consists of four interlocking components that have influenced US foreign policy during the past 70 years. The first component is that the USA has to be militarily preponderant. The second component is that the USA has to reassure and contain its allies. Third, Washington has to integrate other states into US designed institutions like NATO, the UN and free markets like the WTO. Finally, the USA has to inhibit the spread of nuclear weapons (Porter 2018: 9).

The grand strategy of the past 70 years reflected a preponderance of two of the four traditions that characterized political thinking on how America should relate to the rest of the world (Hamilton 2017). The interventionist tendency was built on a domestic alliance between Wilsonians and Hamiltonians and was a powerful force in US foreign policy during most of the post WWII period. The two other traditions—the Jeffersonians and the Jacksonians—were not without influence, but each had a stronger focus on the situation at home rather than on the position of the USA in the world, it is argued by Daniel S. Hamilton (Hamilton 2017: 2).

Donald Trump’s idea of “America first” reflected a radically different vision for the USA based on inspiration from Jacksonian foreign policy thinking. It was fundamentally unilateralist and favored hard power over soft power, etc. A Jacksonian foreign policy is against the USA committing itself to obligations abroad like the Paris Climate Change accord, giving development assistance, etc. Foreign policy inspired by Andrew Jackson is skeptical of a big permanent foreign policy bureaucracy in Washington as well as the USA engaging in multilateral trade arrangements (Hamilton 2017: 3–4).

Turning toward the first component in the grand strategy that the USA has to be militarily preponderant, not much changed during the first 2 years of Donald Trump’s presidency. Rather to the contrary, as Trump promoted significant increases in the administration’s defense budget (Posen 2018: 24ff). According to Barry Posen, the bottom line was that “the US military commitment remains strong and the allies are adding just enough new money to their own defense plans to placate the president. In other words, it is business as usual” (Posen 2018: 23).

Donald Trump did most damage to the second component in the grand strategy about reassuring and containing allies. Repeatedly, the president questioned the commitment in article 5 in the NATO treaty (Palacio 2018). Trump’s repeated attacks on the European NATO partners for not fulfilling their financial commitments did not reassure nor contain them. As of March 2018, Trump had not yet appointed an ambassador to the European Union while the president at the same time announced he would place 25% tariffs on steel and 10% tariffs on aluminum imports from the European Union (Smith and Rizzo 2018: 1–2). The pull out of the Iran nuclear deal in May 2018 pointed in the same direction as far as it took place in the wake of direct talks between the American president, Emanuel Macron and Angela Merkel who both advised Trump not to abandon the agreement (Smith and Rizzo 2018: 1–2).

The president’s skeptical attitudes toward European cooperation within the framework of the EU were reflected in the “2018 National Security Strategy” and in other strategy documents that barely mentioned the European Union (Smith and Rizzo 2018: 1), whereas the EU was hardly mentioned in the National Security Strategy,



“Europe” was referred to in fairly positive terms as stated in the document “a strong and free Europe is of vital importance to the United States. We are bound together by our shared commitment to the principles of democracy, individual freedom and the rule of law” (NNS 2017: 47). Likewise, the 2018 National Defense Strategy stressed that “a strong and free Europe” bound by agreed principles of democracy, national sovereignty and commitment to article 5 in the NATO treaty was “vital to our security” (NDS 2018: 9).

The 2018 Security Strategy emphasized the importance of alliances to US security which lead Kori Schake to remark that the value of alliances seemed much “clearer to the Defense Department than to the White House” (Schake 2018). The adherence to the value of alliances, and thereby, the value of NATO seemed to reflect the strong influence of Defense Secretary James Mattis. This is clearly illustrated by his personal presentation of the Strategy at the “School of Advanced International Studies” (SAIS) that strongly indicated that “this is his Strategy” (Karlin 2018). At the same time, the Defense Strategy stressed that the USA expected the European partners to adapt to the new security challenges to “remain relevant.” It is not to be neglected that the National Security Strategy was explicit in repeating one of Donald Trump’s strong criticisms of the European partners namely that they had to increase their defense and modernization spendings (Karlin 2018: 9).

As to the third component touching upon the international institutions and the free markets, the Trump administration launched policies that clearly abandoned the well-worn paths of the liberal international order. The US withdrawal from a number of international agreements like the Paris climate agreement, the Iran nuclear deal, regional free trade agreements like the “TPP” was one thing. Another was that the administration launched trade wars against friends and allies in Europe and in the European Union and Canada.

In conclusion, based on the policy initiatives and strategy papers launched during 2017 and 2018, it is difficult to escape a conclusion that the Trump administration sought to undermine the policies of former administrations and thus was trying to undermine crucial elements of the grand strategy of the country. It was most significant as far as the components number two and three were concerned. All these initiatives and decisions were in line with the philosophy of Andrew Jackson and the isolationist thinking in the strategic culture. However, the policy initiatives launched by the Trump administration during its first two and half years were not completely isolationist and focused on America first with the commitment to NATO as a possible, though ambiguous exception. It makes it impossible to conclude unambiguously that Donald Trump was able to shift the strategic culture of the USA during his first two and half years in office.

State–society relations

The third explanatory hypothesis states that the polarization of the American political system made it possible for the Trump administration to launch partisan foreign policy initiatives that broke with traditional foreign policy priorities. A key element



in state–society relations and thereby in polarization is the degree of harmony or lack of harmony between government and society.

Since the late 1970s, there was a steady increase in the polarization in the House of Representatives and in the Senate (Barber and McCarty 2015: 17ff). There was a heightened level of partisan polarization at both the elite and mass levels implying that individuals increasingly identify against rather than with political parties (Webster 2018: 127ff). In 2006, it was observed that “a growing body of empirical research shows that the parties in government particularly those in Congress are each growing more homogeneous in their policy positions while the differences between the two parties’ stands on major policy issues are expanding” (Rohac et al.: 6).

Political polarization is related to the population’s trust in the government, and there was a remarkable decline in public trust in the US government since the mid-1960s (Rohac et al. 2018: 4). Fifty years ago, close to 75% of the population trusted the federal government. The figure dropped below 25% in 2016 and during the first year of the Trump administration, the decline continued (Rohac et al. 2018: 4). A similar erosion of trust in authorities and private business was identified when the focus was extended to cover media, churches, corporations and universities. The figures suggest that the decline was not an isolated phenomenon but reflected a broader trend also characterizing the American society before Donald Trump came into office (Wickett 2018: 53). The followers of Trump did not trust the people that had shaped American foreign policy for many years and were highly skeptical about the global engagement of previous governments (Mead 2017: 6). While the followers of Donald Trump did not trust the elite in Washington and its inclinations toward international engagement, the Jacksonian nationalists knew one thing about Trump and that was that “he is unequivocally on their side” (Mead 2017: 7).

A recent survey of “American public opinion and US foreign policy” by The Chicago Council on Global Affairs (Smeltz et al. 2017) showed that an increasing percentage of the American public was in support of an active role of the USA in world affairs (Smeltz et al. 2017: 2). Likewise, no less than 75% supported the American commitment to NATO (Smeltz et al. 2017: 4). The figures maintained the level in 2017 and 2018 despite NATO being among the favorite targets of criticism for Donald Trump during his presidential campaign in 2016 (Smeltz et al. 2017: 13). On the other hand, a 2017 report from the Pew Research Center showed increasing differences between Democrats and Republicans in their views on NATO indicating the existence of polarization within foreign policy. The report indicated that less than 50% of the Republicans were in favor of NATO (Fagan 2018).

When it came to the established foreign policy priorities, the two political parties diverged on core issues like the use of force and the importance of multilateral institutions such as NATO and the UN (Schultz 2017: 10–16). In his analysis, Michael E. Flynn concluded that “increasing polarization effectively closed one avenue for greater cooperation between the executive and Congress” which also made it increasingly difficult to find common ground in foreign policy, and meant that partisan initiatives had a better chance of being carried out successfully (Flynn 2014: 409). Concretely, polarization affected foreign policy making as legislators in the center disappeared leading to the elimination of any overlap between liberal



republicans and conservative democrats (Schultz 2017: 8–9). It made bipartisan agreement on foreign policy initiatives difficult and opened for policy initiatives that had only partisan political support (Schultz 2017: 10ff). Moreover, the polarization increased the risk of dramatic policy swings from one administration to the other complicating long-term commitments to allies and friends (Schultz 2017: 19–21). A number of Trumps' foreign policy initiatives emphasized this point leading Kenneth Schultz to conclude that the political polarization was “a threat to United States' standing in the world” (Schultz 2017: 7).

With the aim to pursue a radically different foreign policy vision, president Trump in 2016 campaigned on a platform to “drain the swamp” which among others was directed toward the foreign policy elite located in Washington DC. Concretely, the swamp referred to the bipartisan class of former officials, media commentators, opinion writers and think tank employees who worried incessantly about “the collapse of the American security order” (Samuels 2016: 7). The prominent position of the bipartisan national security elite in Washington led Barack Obama's former speechwriter Ben Rhodes to describe it as the “Blob.” Historically, it exposed hawkish posturing that tended to get the USA into too many messes abroad (Glasser 2018: 2). It was characteristic of this group of Republican and Democratic foreign policy experts that they embraced a strategy promoting a global “liberal hegemony” that, as a fringe benefit secured “full-employment” for the members of the elite. Exactly for that reason, almost all foreign policy think tanks, lobbies and interest groups were in favor of the interventionist trends in US foreign policy, it is pointed out by Walt (2018a, b: 12).

It was characteristic of the first 2 years of Trump's presidency that he sought to marginalize the Blob. It was done by mainly appointing individuals to crucial government positions who shared Donald Trump's view on the world. In particular, it was the case for John Bolton and Mike Pompeo. It is noteworthy that Bolton very soon after his own appointment named Mira Ricardel, deputy national security advisor. She worked in the Trump presidential 2016 campaign and she came into office with “unassailable credentials as a Trump supporter” (Gramer 2018a, b, c). In spite of the fact that she stayed in office for a short while, it was argued that Mira Ricardel “fits the pattern of many Trump appointees who are not major players in Republican foreign-policy circles.” Trump blacklisted dozens of prominent Republican foreign policy experts from joining the administrations because they dared criticize him during the election campaign (Gramer 2018a, b, c: 3).

Summing up, state–society relations during the first two and a half years of Donald Trump's America were characterized by strong polarization. The polarization was definitely identifiable within the population where the followers of Donald Trump and opinion surveys showed strong skepticism toward established foreign policy priorities and positions involving American involvement in international affairs. The polarization, however, seemed particularly pronounced within the political system opening for the possibility to launch strongly partisan foreign policy initiatives. The negative impact of the partisan polarization cannot be exaggerated, it was argued by James Thurber and Antoine Yoshinaka who found that the polarization discouraged compromise, produced gridlock and fostered mistrust and ultimately, it



hindered the functioning of government institutions (Thurber and Yoshinaka 2015: 1ff; Hetherington and Weiler 2015: 86–112; Persily 2015: 4).

The remarkable marginalization of the bipartisan foreign policy elite, the “Blob” most probably made it easier to promote partisan foreign policy initiatives settling with previous administrations’ foreign policy priorities. Referring to the third explanatory hypothesis, the polarization of the American political system backed by the strong populist nationalist sentiments among many Trump voters contribute to explaining how it was possible for Donald Trump to launch many foreign policy initiatives that clearly broke with traditional US foreign policy priorities.

Government institutions

The fourth explanatory hypothesis states that Donald Trump and his close associates were able to weaken or marginalize core foreign policy government institutions like the State Department and the Pentagon. By weakening and marginalizing the State Department, it can be assumed that input based on diplomatic insight and knowledge was strongly reduced. Likewise, the marginalization of the Pentagon meant that input from the Defense Department based on knowledge of the use of military force and not least based on the understanding of the limits to the use of military power was severely limited. Together with the White House, the Treasury, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the CIA and the National Security Council and the two government departments are the major foreign actors (Lowi et al. 2014: 470–475).

Not only the president but also Congress possesses significant foreign policy powers. In recent years, the general balance between the two institutions tended to favor the presidents (Lindsay 2018: 150–152; Lowi et al. 2014: 168ff). The typical situation was that Congress reacted to initiatives of the president rather than launching its own foreign policy agenda (Lindsay 2018: 145ff). For that reason, Congress is not brought into the analysis here, whereas State Department, the Pentagon and the National Security Council are dealt with in some detail.

Donald Trump’s first Secretary of State Rex Tillerson made dramatic cuts in the number of employees leading to significant reductions in the number of experienced and insightful experts and advisors (Farrow 2018: 257ff; Corrigan et al. 2018). Data from the American Foreign Service Association showed that 60% of State Department’s highest-ranking career officers quit during Trump’s first year. Fewer than half of all top-level positions that need confirmation by the Senate were filled by April 2018. Vital posts as ambassadors in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, South Korea and South Africa were not filled. It led observers to conclude that the State Department was “dysfunctional” and “brought to the brink of ruin by Trump and Tillerson in equal parts” (Beaucamp 2018; Farrow 2018: 295ff).

The appointment in March 2018 of Mike Pompeo to Secretary of State did nothing to change the situation for the State Department. The hiring freeze contributed to demoralize many of the staff and it came to symbolize a leadership that did not value their work (Gramer 2018b). Because Mike Pompeo did nothing to change the situation and because the dragging out of the announcement of ambassadors and



assistant secretaries of state continued, it only contributed to the already existing frustration (Gramer 2018b).

In addition to the reduction in the number of staff, Pompeo oversaw a so-called “Trumpfication” of the State Department implying cracking down on civil servants suspected of leaking information or stating political views in opposition to the White House. The initiatives to boost loyalty among the staff produced a “culture of fear” and in June 2018, the State Department was described as “just so battered” by a former State Department official (Tracy 2018a, b). The decreasing number of staff together with the culture of fear had a number of consequences. The author of the book “War on Peace,” Ronan Farrow pointed out that by spring 2018 “the State Department is simply being wiped out...we have never seen the kind of nosedive that we are seeing now” (Pesca 2018; Farrow 2018). If the assessment is correct, it implies that it was very difficult for the department to pursue the traditional foreign policy goals of the USA. Moreover, the remarkable weakening of the department implied that it was increasingly difficult for its staff to access the president with policy advice based on knowledge of the past diplomatic practices and the potential value of diplomacy in foreign policy.

Unlike the State Department, the Defense Department received increasing funding during the first years of the Trump administration. In the fiscal year 2017, defense spending totaled above 600 billion US \$ equivalent to a “nearly 20% increase in funding in the past few years” (Grant 2018). The 2019 National Defense Authorization Act authorized 717 billion US \$ in defense spending. Unlike the president’s relationship with the State Department, Donald Trump explicitly backed the armed forces promising to support them as much as possible (Ward 2018).

However, the personal behavior of the president strained the relationship between the White House and the Pentagon. president Trump routinely kept the Pentagon out of the loop in administration decisions causing confusion in the department as well as causing doubt about where the USA stood on national security issues (Mitchell 2018). Pentagon officials were blindsided by numerous sudden policy changes announced, and there were many examples that the White House released statements on security issues without coordinating or notifying the Pentagon in advance. “The Hill” lists no less than 12 examples of policy announcements that took the Pentagon by surprise. Crucial among the examples was Trump’s ordering a ban on transgender military service, the withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal, the announcement of a halt for joint military drills on the Korean peninsula etc. (Mitchell 2018). On a number of crucial defense issues, military officers and officials in the Pentagon disagreed with the President and the White House. It was the case for the establishment of a space force, on the value of the transatlantic military alliance, the temporary halt on military drills on in Korea and on Trump’s wish to have a military parade in Washington (Mitchell 2018).

One consequence of these events was it “complicated the relationship with the military” and in June 2018, the assessment was the president and the Pentagon was in disagreement on a number of important issues (Ward 2018). Apparently, it had to do with Jim Mattis that was increasingly being squeezed out of important policy decisions by John Bolton and Mike Pompeo (Seligman 2018). The bottom line appeared to be that “Mattis and his Pentagon seem increasingly out of the loop



on important national security decisions—and it does not look like that will change any time soon” (Ward 2018). By marginalizing the Pentagon, the input based on knowledge and expertise on the use and limitations of military power was severely weakened.

Finally, John Bolton was appointed National Security Advisor in April 2018. When he took over the job, he overhauled the NSC staff replacing a number of staffers with his own people. “It’s Bolton’s NSC, he owns that thing body and soul,” it was argued (Gray 2018). The reduction in the number of staff and the appointment of loyalists to the NSC was interpreted as if “Bolton (was) concentrating his power... He is certainly making himself incredibly powerful by eliminating other power centers that historically existed at the NSC,” it was assessed by an insider only a month after the Bolton appointment (Tracy 2018a, b). Rosie Gray found that John Bolton was “the latest case study in the administration in how much an advisor’s views and ideology can really influence—or not influence—Trump” (Gray 2018). The remarkably prominent position of John Bolton, and thereby, the NSC was the preliminary result of more than 30 years of development in US government. According to William Burns recent book on American Diplomacy, the NSC has grown in size and influence during the last three decades. The NSC has become “a crisis-driven center for foreign” given priority to rapid military solutions instead of seeking diplomatic solutions to problems and challenges. The continued strengthening of the National Security Council has led to a “militarization of US diplomacy centered in the White House,” it is concluded (Suri 2019: 6).

In sum, when it comes to important government institutions, very significant changes took place during the first two and a half years of Donald Trump’s presidency. First and most remarkably, the State Department was weakened by dramatic cuts in the number of experienced staff, and thereby, the potential of the Department’s influence on foreign policy making was severely limited. The Defense secretary and the Pentagon were marginalized in important policy decisions despite the Department and the armed forces received increasing funding. It leads to the conclusion that after two and a half years in office, Donald Trump in close cooperation with John Bolton and his NSC and Mike Pompeo had reached a position where it was possible to pursue their specific foreign policy goals without the potentially moderating influence of the expertise and knowledge of the State Department and the Pentagon.

Concluding discussion

The paper raised the questions why and how it was possible for Donald Trump as a new president to launch so many foreign policy initiatives that pointed toward a redesigning of established positions in American foreign policy. Based on the analysis here, a number of observations can be presented. First, core foreign policy decision-makers like Donald Trump, Mike Pompeo and John Bolton simply shared the view or the perception that the active and interventionist foreign policy of former administrations was not in the interest of the USA. The three men shared a deeply embedded skepticism toward alliances and toward allies that contribute to explain



why the Trump administration launched so many initiatives aimed at redesigning the established priorities of American foreign policy. It was obvious in relation to the European Union and the European NATO members. It was also obvious in relation to the abandonment of the Iran nuclear deal, the American withdrawal from the TPP and the pulling out of the Paris agreement.

Second, it was concluded that the Trump administration's foreign policy initiatives were very different from the policies of the former administrations. It was established that it was too early to conclude if the core elements in the US grand strategy were being undermined after only two and a half years with the new president. On the other hand, there is no doubt that the foreign policy of the Trump administration strongly challenged the strategic culture by pushing it in a unilateral direction stressing a narrow interpretation of the national interests of the USA instead of maintaining an interventionist and multilateral approach to foreign affairs. The president's erratic and often unpredictable behavior in foreign affairs contributes to making it difficult to make a firm conclusion to what extent the American grand strategy was being undermined and changed during the first 30 months with Donald Trump in office.

The analysis makes it possible to answer why the Trump administration was seeking to redesign US foreign policy. First, it was because the president, the Secretary of State and the National Security Advisor shared the perception that participating in alliances and having close allies were not in the interest of the USA. Second, the analysis also pointed toward the conclusion that the perceptions of these core decision-makers were so established that they tried to change core elements in the strategic culture of the country. However, the disagreements between the three core decision makers and not least, the erratic behavior of Donald Trump make it difficult to draw a firm conclusion. Therefore, the answer to the second "why" is ambiguous.

Third, the strong polarization of the American political system and of the American society opened for launching highly partisan initiatives within US foreign policy. No doubt, the backcloth to the reorientation of partisan foreign policy initiatives was Donald Trump's successful marginalization of the bipartisan foreign policy "Blob" in Washington in combination with the unambiguous backing from his political followers. In brief, the first answer to "how" it was possible to redesign established foreign policy priorities was, it was because of the strong polarization of the political system and of the American society that simply blocked for striking compromises and agreeing on moderate political solutions.

Fourth, it was concluded that an additional explanation to how it was possible to begin redesigning American foreign policy under Donald Trump was the remarkable reduction in the number of experienced and senior staff in the State Department. The reduction in staff and the general marginalization of the traditional foreign policy expertise meant the cautious voices and alternative policy suggestions were in practical terms silenced. The marginalization of the Pentagon in decision-making on crucial foreign and security policy issues was not due to reductions in funding and thus in staff. The explanation was far more simple. It was because the president made and announced his decisions without consulting the expertise in the defense ministry. In this context, it is not to be neglected while the State Department and the Pentagon were weakened and marginalized whereas the National Security Council



under John Bolton was in a remarkably prominent position promoting the “militarization” of American foreign policy.

The result of these different steps and circumstances was that Donald Trump after two and a half years in the White House had brought himself in a position where many traditional obstacles to pursuing a unilateralist foreign policy were removed. Trump and his administration was able to present, announce and launch a remarkable number of policy initiatives breaking with the declared and established foreign policy priorities of the USA. Not all of Trump’s declared policies were implemented by mid-2019. But, the road ahead was open for radical changes.

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