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“On my honour as a student of the Diplomatische Akademie Wien, I submit this work in good faith and pledge that I have neither given nor received unauthorized assistance on it.”

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Abstract

The Trump administration has been characterized as departing from previous administrations in both form and tone. Nowhere are the potential consequences of such a departure more evident in Trump's nuclear policy. Thus far the administration has shown hostility to arms control regimes such as the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty, and have opted to engage in nuclear competition. These actions beg for an explanation.

My research indicates that a solution for explaining the Trump administration's nuclear strategy can be found with Mearsheimer's offensive realism. American nuclear policies are nested within greater national defense and grand strategies. A coherent philosophy unites American security policies, and it is one that prioritizes military strength above all other considerations, and eschews reliance on alliances and institutions.

Offensive realism is a subset of neorealist international relations theory developed by John Mearsheimer. Like other realist theories, it proposes that the international system is anarchic, lists states as the primary actors within the system, prioritizes power as the currency of international relations, and observes that survival is the first priority among states. Where it differs from traditional realism is that it posits that pursuing hegemony is the most rational goal of a state. Hegemony offers the only true security in a system where one can never be sure about the intentions of one's neighbors.

The Trump administration's nuclear strategy is consistent with Mearsheimer's offensive realism in that it doubles down on nuclear competition and downplays weapon reductions and cooperation. Offensive realism suggest that nations will engage in nuclear competition regardless of its current deterrent ability, because of the allure of nuclear hegemony. If a nation could manage a technological advancement that nullified its opponents' arsenals, it would immediately become the world hegemon. The Trump administration's nuclear policies, and security strategy as whole, are consistent with a desire to achieve hegemony.

Abstract

Die Trump-Administration wurde als Abweichung von früheren Administrationen in Form und Ton charakterisiert. Nirgendwo sind die möglichen Folgen einer solchen Abweichung in Trumps Nuklearpolitik offensichtlicher. Bisher hat sich die Regierung gegen Rüstungskontrollsysteme wie den Zwischenvertrag über nukleare Streitkräfte gewehrt und sich für eine Teilnahme am nuklearen Wettbewerb entschieden. Diese Handlungen bedürfen einer Erklärung.

Meine Recherchen zeigen, dass eine Lösung zur Erklärung der nuklearen Strategie der Trump-Regierung mit Mearsheimers offensivem Realismus gefunden werden kann. Die amerikanische Nuklearpolitik ist mit einer stärkeren nationalen Verteidigung und differenzierten Strategien verbunden. Eine kohärente Philosophie, die die amerikanische Sicherheitspolitik vereint, priorisiert die militärische Stärke vor allen anderen Überlegungen und vermeidet das Vertrauen in Allianzen und Institutionen.

Offensiver Realismus ist eine Teilmenge der Neorealistischen Theorie der internationalen Beziehungen, die von John Mearsheimer entwickelt wurde. Wie bei realistischen Theorien wird vorgeschlagen, dass das internationale System anarchisch ist, Staaten als Hauptakteure innerhalb des Systems aufführt, Macht als Währung der internationalen Beziehungen priorisiert und das Überleben als oberste Priorität unter den Staaten betrachtet. Was sich vom traditionellen Realismus unterscheidet, ist die Annahme, dass das Streben nach Hegemonie das rationalste Ziel eines Staates ist. Hegemonie bietet die einzig wahre Sicherheit in einem System, in dem man sich über die Absichten seiner Nachbarn niemals sicher sein kann.

Die Nuklearstrategie der Trump-Regierung steht im Einklang mit Mearsheimers offensivem Realismus, indem sie den nuklearen Wettbewerb verdoppelt und die Reduzierung und Zusammenarbeit von Waffen herunterspielt. Offensiver Realismus deutet darauf hin, dass sich die Nationen auf Grund der Anziehungskraft der nuklearen Hegemonie unabhängig von ihrer derzeitigen Abschreckungskraft auf Atomwettbewerb einlassen werden. Wenn eine Nation einen technologischen Fortschritt schaffen könnte, der die Arsenale ihrer Gegner zunichte macht, würde sie sofort zum Welthegeemon. Die Nuklearpolitik der Trump-Regierung und die Sicherheitsstrategie als Ganzes stehen im Einklang mit dem Wunsch, eine Hegemonie zu erreichen.

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Introduction

Since the beginning of his presidential campaign through the current hour, President Donald J Trump has promulgated a policy of what he calls “America First.” Although the sentiment of promoting the interests of United States is hardly new or uncommon for a president, the substance of his policies have come under criticism for their departure from previous American political norms. In a presidency that is an outlier for standard US leadership in both form and substance, Trump has taken aim at some of the sacred cows of US policy and attempted to impose his own vision. In no realm is the difference between his predecessors and he starker than in foreign affairs, and nowhere are the potential consequences so serious as in his nuclear policy. When it comes to America’s role in the world and how it seeks to protect its interests, Trump again has used his philosophy of “America First” to frame a security policy that seems at odds with the status quo. He claims the US is in multipolar competition with China and the Russia Federation in a way not seen since the end of the Cold War. Yet, he lambasts American allies and has made threats about pulling out security organizations like NATO and trade regulation organizations like the WTO. While saying these things, his administration has also taken efforts to boost the military and economic strength of the US. This “renewal” of American power involves reemphasizing the prominence of nuclear weapons and deterrence to a level not seen since the 1980s. Why is this the case?

My research will attempt to answer the question: **how can one explain the Trump nuclear strategy?** This kind of question will obviously incur further questions about the greater grand strategy of the Trump administration and other security issues. Such factors are important in understanding the seeming indecipherable noises emanating from the White House on issues ranging from American partnership with NATO to antagonism with North Korea. Given that the United States is still, for the moment, the single biggest player on the international scene, understanding its motivations is important. If one can understand why the current administration makes the decisions that it does, then one can calibrate one’s own actions or, perhaps, make predictions about future American actions. The logic that I intend to apply to the nuclear

policy of the Trump administration will be culled from both international relations theory and history. History can provide the context and points of comparison in order to evaluate the current US policy, to include questions over whether there is actually anything new about the Trump presidency's policies at all. International relations theory will provide the overarching logic for explaining the administration's behavior and will do most of the heavy lifting when it comes to the core question of how to make sense of Trump's policies. My goals will be to decipher what the Trump administration is doing and thinking concerning its nuclear policy. Given the interconnectedness of defense policies, this will require understanding the broader context of American national security strategy and defense policy. I suspect they will reinforce each other and follow similar, if not identical, logic.

Methodology

In order to analyze Trump's strategy, I will first have to synthesize it from the administration's output. To this end I will have to use the statements of Donald Trump, the policy documents of the administration, and actual policy outcomes -budgets, treaties, deployments, etc. From these sources I will need to cull common threads until I can paint a coherent picture of what is happening. The problem is to separate rhetoric from substance. Trump must be taken seriously as the president, but not too seriously as there is often a disconnect between what he proclaims publicly and what policies are enacted. For example, he has been a frequent critic of American alliances such as NATO and has repeatedly threatened to downgrade American security commitments to Europe. However, since his administration took office, the United States has deployed more troops to Poland than ever before¹ and has actually increased its on the ground commitments to the alliance. How can one make sense of this? One way is to look at the totality of statements, policies and actions. Yes, Trump has called the alliance obsolete, yet he has also walked such statements back and repeatedly announced

¹ "US Troops Welcome By Poland", BBC, 14 February 2016, available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-europe-38624809/us-troops-welcomed-by-poland>

American dedication to NATO after criticizing it². Moreover, the *National Security Strategy* points to American alliances as a source of power and influence for the United States. Looking at the balance of evidence, and in conjunction with America identifying Russia as a global adversary, the policy of the US towards NATO does seem to be one of public beratement, but enduring support. In his book, *The Anatomy of Fascism*, Robert Paxton discussed the problem with defining fascism when there were stark contradictions between what they said and the policies they carried out. He focused more on policy than rhetoric, explaining that, “what fascists *did* tell us at least as much as what they *said*.”³ I will not argue in this paper that Trump is a fascist, but this methodology is most similar to what I will be doing. If there is a coherence in the Trump administration’s strategy, it lays in his policies, and his rhetoric is only valuable insofar as it is backed up by action. This kind of analysis will be synthetic

Understanding the Trump nuclear strategy presents unique problems from a literature perspective. The primary issue is that the administration is only two years into its first term, so contemporary books on anything covering Donald Trump’s presidency are hard to come by. Those that do exist, such as *Fire and Fury* by Michael Wolff and *Fear* by Bob Woodward, are works of popular journalism that are polemic in nature. Administration officials dispute much of what is described in these books and it can be difficult to determine the veracity of their accounts. More to the point, they do not take deep looks at the administration’s policies or offer any analysis of them. If anything is to be taken from either of them, it would have to be corroborated by other sources. The same can be said for most of the journalism surrounding this presidency up to this point, however there are already a wealth of academic and peer reviewed articles covering the policy implications of the presidency. My work will lean heavily on these articles and analysis. The most important documents, at least thus far, are official policy documents and statements penned by Donald Trump himself (at least officially). The most comprehensive documents are reports and strategies published by the US government

² Louis Nelson, “Trump says US ties to NATO ‘very strong,’” *Politico*, 12 July 2018, available at <https://www.politico.com/story/2018/07/12/trump-nato-spending-714976>

³ Robert Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism*, (New York: Random House, 2003) Pg. 9.

as they contain both directives from the presidency and explain the context that administration believes it is operating in.

The bulk of my research will be done through critical document analysis. While President Trump has said and tweeted a great many things, the important information lies in the policy documents that his administration has published. Primarily I will examine the *National Security Strategy*, the *National Defense Strategy*, and the *Nuclear Posture Review*. These documents, published in a three-month period between December 2017 and February 2018 are the road map of the administration's national strategy. They are all products of planning processes involving multiple government agencies developed under the leadership of key administration officials and cabinet members. Most importantly, these documents, while not legally binding in any sense, represent a communication of intent to the country, the world, and the administration's own bureaucracy. In them the administration explains its worldview, identifies interests, and lays out a strategy on how it hopes to attain its goals. The documents are also connected and concepts are nested within one another. The *National Security Strategy* explains the US grand strategy in broad terms, and contains elements of defense strategy. The *National Defense Strategy* is a document by and for the Department of Defense which explains military policy in the context of wider strategy. The *Nuclear Posture Review* is a further drilling down of defense priorities as they apply to nuclear weapons. It is a sub section of national defense strategy and explains the current state of the nuclear arsenal, the president's policies on nuclear weapons, and changes that he intends to make to the nuclear deterrent. A caveat to my research is that most policy documents have both classified and unclassified versions. The ones currently available to the public are unclassified summaries of the policies, and do not represent the full breadth of the administration's planning on a topic. However, they are still valuable sources of the administration's thought process.

Finally, my research will be inductive by nature. I will attempt to use a theory of international relations in order to make sense of the Trump administration's nuclear and security strategy. As I already mentioned, deciphering the inner workings of the Trump administration is extremely difficult given the operational security of the US government

and the uncertain nature of unofficial outputs from the White House. Determining the inner machinations of the Trump White House, considered famously dysfunctional, would be a thesis unto itself. Moreover, given the myriad of possible agendas and strategies at play amongst the White House and the various organs of government, using statements and interviews by officials can be unreliable, especially when such statements are not officially corroborated. The most reliable way to analyze the Trump administration's outputs is through observing policy decisions that have concrete consequences. As mentioned before, I intend to focus on actions. This presents a weakness to my research, in that by focusing purely on outputs I will likely be limiting myself to a particular school of international relations theory: realism. However, I believe that given the internal chaos of the Trump White House, as well as the President's penchant for political theater, the best way to create a coherent picture of Trump's policies is to focus on official outputs; such outputs mean official sanction and funding. Although this will constrain my work, I believe that I can show that at least in terms of official policy, the Trump administration is working under assumptions that can be explained by a realist school of international relations.

Theoretical basis

A suitable answer to question of how the Trump administration views foreign policy and, consequently, why it formulates security and nuclear policy the way it does may be found with John Mearsheimer. In his book *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, he lays a theory of international relations that he refers to as "offensive realism." It is a theory from the realist school and thus prioritizes the actions between states at the expense of domestic politics. I will explain his theory, as I understand it, and then attempt to place Trump's policies within the paradigm and determine whether they make sense or not.

First, Mearsheimer, like all realists, sees the international system as anarchic and bereft of overriding authority. There is no regime, whether governmental or legal, to whom states can appeal to for redress in the case where they feel that they have been wronged. The anarchy of the system is its own ordering system that is made up of

independent states without any kind of central authority.⁴ This is not to say that there are not arrangements that can influence behavior. Supranational organizations like the United Nations may possess some moral authority, and international trade regimes such as the World Trade organization can offer a structure for nations to compete with each other in. However, there is no final authority over nations, and short of armed conflict, it can be near impossible to force an economically stable nation to do anything it does not consent to. There are no police or emergency services in the international system, nor a justice system that has the power and authority to resolve conflicts in the way that a state's justice system is able to.⁵

Mearsheimer's second assumption is that all powers possess some kind of military capability. This power is inherent and it gives states the ability to harm one another.⁶ This makes all states potentially dangerous to one another, however there is also an ordering principle here as well since states that are better armed present a greater threat to their neighbors. Power in this regard is usually an amalgamation of factors that includes the amount of weaponry, the technical level and capabilities of said weaponry, nuclear arms, economic strength, and population. At the lowest level and in the absence of technologically advanced weaponry, states could use sticks and stones to attack one another.

Mearsheimer's next assumption is that states can never be sure about the intentions of one another.⁷ This essentially means that states are not mind readers with regard to each other, and despite the lack of indicators of violence toward one another, one can never be 100% sure of another's intentions. At first blush, this may seem like a cheap form of hard solipsism; the idea that one can only be sure of is that his or her own mind is the only thing that can one know for sure to exist. Yet in philosophy, despite not being able to solve the problem of hard solipsism, one still acts as if they are interacting with other conscious beings, and one's experience tends to show evidence for this. Would the same not hold true for nations, in that despite not knowing with 100%

⁴ John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2003) Pg. 30.

⁵ Ibid, 32.

⁶ Ibid. 30.

⁷ Ibid, Pg. 30

confidence that another state will not invade them, they still act like it is the case that it will not? According to Mearsheimer, the answer is no, and the reason is that the stakes of the competition are way too high for that. This is because of the fourth assumption: all states seek survival as their primary goal.⁸ This is self-evident; rare is the state that purposefully engages in its own destruction. While states may pursue other agendas, their primary goal is their own existence; after all, one cannot engage in building human capital or environmental reform if one does not exist. This is above all a security issue, and defines the bottom line for state security policies. Mearsheimer's fifth and final assumption about the international system is that states are rational.⁹ They are aware of both themselves and their environment and they think about how to continue surviving. Like a *homo economicus*, they weigh their preferences and make choices based on cost-benefit analyses. Again, no one actively seeks their own destruction.

Working with all these assumptions, Mearsheimer then develops a model of how he believes that states will act in the international system. He focuses mostly on "great powers" as a subset of the principal actors in international relations, states, because they have both high influence and freedom of action. Due the anarchic nature of the state system, which does not include a "911"¹⁰ for states to call in times of crisis, there is no reliable security other than which a state provides for itself. States essentially live in fear of each other's power. The best way to hedge against the power of rival states is to maximize the power of one's own state, either making it impossible or too costly for another state to win a war against oneself. This means that a state's goal is hegemonic power because a hegemon has the kind of dominance that would dissuade rivals from attacking it, although this is still the means to the end of security. However, Mearsheimer, believes that world hegemonic power, outside of possessing a monopoly on nuclear weapons, is impossible and the best that states can achieve is regional hegemony.¹¹ Such power means that a state has control over its own region, and can reach into other regions, if not control them themselves. A believer in both the "stopping

⁸ Ibid, Pg.31

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid, Pg. 32

¹¹ Ibid, Pg. 41.

power of water” and the primacy of land power, Mearsheimer does not think that a state can project enough power overseas to control another region, meaning that while the United States is the only modern regional hegemon, it is not a global hegemon. However, regional hegemons “do not want peers”¹² and seek to disrupt the emergence of other regional hegemons who could potentially garner enough power to affect their rise to power. This means while they may not engage in a total war against another possible regional hegemon, they will try to disrupt it through strategies meant to weaken their power or keep them occupied.

Mearsheimer argues that there are strategies for both gaining power and stymieing the rise of competitors. The first and most obvious strategy is war, however this can be very costly and dangerous.¹³ War is always uncertain and the consequences of failure are most severe. A nation can engage in blackmail against lesser powers to garner strength, but it is less effective against strong nations with powerful militaries.¹⁴ Two related strategies are bait and bleed and simple bloodletting. The former is where one state causes two rivals to engage in war and sap their respective strengths through attrition,¹⁵ the latter is when a state seeks to increase the cost of a war that a rival is already involved in without engaging directly.¹⁶ The US secret arming of the Mujahidin against the Soviets was bloodletting. To check an aggressor’s power, nations can also engage in balancing and buck passing. Balancing is when states take charge of ensuring that an aggressor does not erode the balance of power.¹⁷ A state can signal its intention to join a war in the case where an aggressor initiates a conflict. It can enter into a defensive alliance, or “external balancing,” in order to strengthen a coalition against an aggressor. The last option is “internal balancing” where a country seeks to increase its own power in order to create a powerful deterrent. This usually means building a strong military. Buck passing is where a state seeks to get another state to bear the burden of deterrence or warfare while it remains aloof. This can amount to

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid, Pg. 147

¹⁴ Ibid, Pg. 152

¹⁵ Ibid, Pg. 153.

¹⁶ Ibid, Pg. 154

¹⁷ Ibid, Pg. 156.

“free riding” on the part of passer and can be inherently dangerous in cases where the buck holder declines to check aggression. Mearsheimer also names appeasement and bandwagoning as concepts in deterrence, but finds them unsuitable strategies for great powers under offensive realism. Both of them cede too much power and initiative to an opponent and leave one helpless against aggression.

Mearsheimer and Nuclear Arms

When it comes to nuclear weapons, Mearsheimer’s opinion is similar to his view on conventional power; states will expand their capabilities in order to gain advantage. In the international system it is impossible to achieve anything like world hegemony given current technology. This is because of the stopping power of water and primacy of land power, in Mearsheimer’s view.¹⁸ The only possible exception to his rule, would be a case where a state achieves nuclear supremacy. Nuclear superiority means the ability to use one’s own nuclear weapons without fear of reprisal, effectively giving a state the ability to act with impunity. Such a state could effectively neutralize the nuclear forces of its rivals with a “splendid” first strike, and then focus on their rivals’ conventional forces. Merely having more weapons than another state is not enough to gain superiority; the destructive potential of even a small arsenal is worrying enough to offset the numbers advantage.¹⁹ The superiority comes from technological advantage, whether it’s the ability to destroy a rivals arsenal before a first strike, or a defense mechanism that could intercept enemy weapons before they reach one’s territory. The benefits of such power are enormous as a nuclear superior state would immediately become a hegemon and their security would be all but assured, at least as long as they remained a hegemon.

In a world with multiple nuclear armed rivals with sufficient technology for each state to launch a second strike, nations are said to be in state of mutually assured destruction (MAD). This does not mean that each state can deal an equal amount of destruction to one another, merely that there will be at least some destruction meted out to every combatant. Given the destructive force of nuclear weapons, almost any amount of nuclear damage, especially to a major population center, is considered unacceptable.

¹⁸ Ibid, Pg. 40.

¹⁹ Ibid Pg. 129.

For many traditional realists, the establishment of a MAD world meant that nuclear weapons had reached a peak of what they could effectively accomplish and that merely stockpiling more would not help; the sheer volume of weapons already on the table made a “splendid” first strike ineffective.²⁰ A state can never be 100% sure that it has neutralized all of a rival’s weapons and avoid nuclear retaliation. Moreover, there were a limited number of targets that nuclear weapons were considered worth using against. The United States established a list 200 Soviet cities to strike with between 150 and 200 warheads that would destroy the requisite population and industrial capacity to ensure the “destruction” of the USSR.²¹ However, the United States had over 10,000 warheads and the list of targets had swollen to over 50,000 possible targets by the 1980s.²² Why was this the case?

Mearsheimer explains that even in a world with credible deterrence, nations still seek nuclear supremacy because the rewards of achieving it are so vast. Such a state would be the sole world hegemon and be utterly secure from existential threats posed by other states. American nuclear planners and politicians never fully accepted the logic of MAD as an iron law and refused to settle into a stalemate with limited nuclear arsenals. While neither side made an all-out effort to achieve nuclear supremacy, the competition continued. Both American and Soviet planners developed technology that gave better first strike capabilities, hardened their own forces, and began developing missile defense technology. At the same time, they also engaged in arms limitation and reduction negotiations that lead to SALT I and II, START, and the INF. The way one can explain this sort of half-hearted (but still serious) competition is that it is a form of hedging. Mearsheimer explains that in military power, technology can very quickly alter the status quo. It also unpredictable, no one knows which way it will develop.²³ One needs to keep in the arms development race in order to ensure that a sudden technological breakthrough by one’s opponent does not immediately render one’s own

²⁰ Kenneth Waltz, “The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: More May be Better,” *Adelphi Papers*, No 171 (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies 1981), Pg.34

²¹ Milton Leitenberg, “Presidential Directive 59: United States Nuclear Weapon Targeting Policy,” *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol 18, No 4, 1981. Pg. 313.

²² Mearsheimer, Pg. 227.

²³ Ibid, Pg. 231.

power obsolete. Technology also diffuses asymmetrically. New technology is very rarely developed by states simultaneously, and once a state does innovate it can create a window of advantage until their rival catches up. No one wants to be at a disadvantage for however short a time that may be. Thus, both the US and the USSR engaged in the nuclear arms race far past the point of “necessity.” Neither wanted to be left behind by emerging technology, but also the allure of nuclear supremacy was so strong. If one side developed a dominant technology that could render his opponent’s arsenal obsolete, such as a 100% effective first strike capability or missile defense system, then that state would have become the world hegemon overnight. Given Mearsheimer’s theory, we can examine the Trump national security strategy, to include nuclear policy, and determine whether or not offensive realism provides an acceptable explanation for the administration’s policies.

What Is the Trump Strategy?

“Make America Great Again.” This is the slogan of the Trump administration. It has been on hats and posters at campaign rallies. It has been said by President Donald J. Trump, and his surrogates and supporters over and over again. It is his philosophy on government, and appears in policy documents directing the organs of his administration on how to carry out their duties. But what does it mean? In the context of a nuclear and security policy, does this phrase have any weight at all? To find out, we can take a top down approach to analyzing the Trump administrations’ strategy. We can begin by first determining how the Trump administration views the world, and most importantly how it conceives of power. This includes what constitutes power, and where said power is concentrated in the world. Then one can observe administration outputs and statements in order to determine what the goals of the United States are, and what strategies it will employ in order to accomplish its objectives. Finally, we can observe how nuclear weapons fit in to the larger Trump strategy, and what they can tell us about what assumptions the administration is operating under. This can provide a possible answer for what the Trump strategy is and possibly allow us to make predictions about what they will do next.

The Worldview.

To understand the Trump strategy, we must first understand how the Trump administration sees the world. In this regard, the Trump administration certainly offers a view that diverges from previous administrations. On 27 April 2016, then candidate Trump delivered an address to an event hosted by the *National Interest* where he laid out his foreign policy vision. Although the speech was in the vein of a campaign speech and resembled more a polemic against his opponents, above all President Obama, and was somewhat rambling and confused, there were the planks of a foreign policy vision present. Coming from the position that previous administrations' tenures had been "disasters," Trump saw the US in a world where its resources had been overextended and her military weakened by the economic issues that had been plaguing the United States. He additionally complained that with this newfound martial weakness that American allies "did not pay their fair share" and that American adversaries no longer "respected" the US.²⁴ The speech was frankly dominated by recrimination and blame for his political adversaries, but it was quite clear that he felt the US no longer enjoyed the type of dominance that it held immediately following the Cold War. It also appeared that he was very concerned with free riders among American allies. He mentioned new rivals emerging, and although he was conciliatory towards the possibility of peaceful cooperation with the Russian Federation and China, he was quite clear that he felt the both nations had increased their military capabilities at the expense of the United States.²⁵ He added that although he believed that the US and Russia and China were "not bound to be adversaries" that "serious differences"²⁶ existed. His main complaint was in keeping with his theme of economic renewal, in that he focused on a China that had been rising economically at American expense. The fact that he singled out these nations for special mention should indicate that he already saw them at least as competitors. As far as speech content concerning his worldview was concerned, that was about it. The US was weakened both economically and two potential rivals had

²⁴ Donald Trump, "Trump on Foreign Policy," Speech to the *National Interest*, 27 April 2016, available at <https://nationalinterest.org/print/feature/trump-foreign-policy-15960>.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

gained strength. The majority of the speech was for new policy prescriptions, which actually were far more insightful.

Because the policy changes candidate Trump claimed he wanted to implement were more enlightening in explaining his world view, and did not yet constitute administration outcomes, I will address them now. He began by stating the following:

“The direction I will outline today will also return us to a timeless principle. My foreign policy will always put the interests of the American people, and American security, above all else. That will be the foundation of every decision that I will make. America First will be the major and overriding theme of my administration.”²⁷

At first blush this is nothing new; it’s simply a reworking of “Make America Great Again” to fit into the rubric of foreign policy. However, combined with his policy prescriptions, it constitutes an opening salvo against the international system and US foreign policy prerogatives since the end of the Cold War. Claiming that US began to go “badly off course” during the Clinton administration, Trump took aim at US attempts to nation build and promote democracy, especially in the Middle East by arguing “it all began with the dangerous idea that we could make Western democracies out of countries that had no experience or interest in becoming a Western democracy.”²⁸ Implicit in his criticism is also the notion that it is not necessarily in the interests of the US to engage in democracy promotion. As he sees it, US efforts have led to general instability, naming Iraq, Libya, and Egypt as failures of US policy²⁹, and drained American coffers. Instead, he argues that the US should forget about nation building and focus its efforts on “stability” instead. His primary goal was to “rebuild” the US military and economy, and after criticizing spending cuts implemented by the Obama administration, he claimed that “we will spend what we need to rebuild our military.”³⁰ It is quite clear from this that he sees military strength as the primary currency of international power. He emphasizes this point by noting that he believes that the US can

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

only deal with Russia and China “from a position of strength,”³¹ and by this he meant military strength. Although he goes on to note that “our goal is peace and prosperity, not war and destruction” he firmly believed that in order to have peace, “[American] military dominance must be unquestioned.”³²

Having dispensed with liberal nation building and democracy promotion as policies and putting military strength front in center, candidate Trump then explained that he wanted a foreign policy based on interests. His first interest was the Middle East where “our goals must be to defeat terrorists and promote regional stability, not radical change.”³³ Granted, the context of putting Middle East stability first was to needle the Obama administration for its policies in Syria, Libya, and Egypt. However, he was making a statement that previous US experiences in the Middle East had been failures and that country should focus its efforts primarily on defeating terrorism and not creating space for new radical Islamic organizations to emerge. He was quite critical of the Iraq invasion in 2003 and saw the emergence of the Islamic State as a direct consequence. His next interest was a rather vague offer to reset relations with Russia (of course not using the word “reset”) saying it was his belief that the US and Russia “are not bound to be adversaries.” However Russian relations was also where he mentioned that the US must be in a position of strength and he indicated his willingness to walk away from the table if he couldn’t make a “deal” favorable to the US; a sort of ‘take it or leave it’ mentality. China was his main target in terms of defining US interests, yet he was focused exclusively on trade imbalances and gave very little attention to it’s increased military strength, and none at all to its increased military presence in the south China Sea.

Trump rounded out his vision of American interests by calling out NATO allies and claiming, with not a little underserved confidence, that as president he would hold a summit and address a “rebalancing of financial commitments.”³⁴ The crux of his criticism, which he would repeat throughout the campaign and beyond, was that the

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid

America's NATO allies were not pulling their weight in terms of contributing to the alliance. Although he fundamentally misunderstands how the defense budgets work vis-à-vis NATO, in that he seems to believe that NATO has membership 'dues' and that other countries are in arrears, it does demonstrate that he believes that the US has a 'free rider problem' in terms of its allies. This opinion supports a larger worldview that is skeptical of globalism and foreign cooperation agreements. He summed up his vision thus,

"We will no longer surrender this country, or its people, to the false song of globalism. The nation-state remains the true foundation for happiness and harmony. I am skeptical of international unions that tie us up and bring America down, and will never enter America into any agreement that reduces our ability to control our own affairs."³⁵

Trump clearly believes that United States must have as much freedom of action as possible, and is of the view the world order the US has built and taken a stake in maintaining has been to the detriment of the US.

Trump's opening speech on foreign policy articulated the positions that he would run on and how he saw America's position in the world. He clearly saw the US in a state of decline and that renewal was needed. He was suspect of foreign nations, to include allies, and felt that the US had been taken advantage of by others since the end of the Cold War. To rectify this state of affairs, he wanted a program of military and economic strengthening that would put the US in a position to defend its interests. The position of strength he envisioned meant unquestioned military dominance. He was skeptical of past foreign interventions because the commitment of blood and treasure had weakened the US and destabilized the world, particularly in the Middle East. In this regard he was clearly taking a position of *realpolitik* based on keeping the world stable and protecting a status quo with the US remaining in a hegemonic position. Liberal internationalism and democracy promotion, at least at gunpoint, were ineffective and a waste of precious resources. To this end he wanted to cultivate allies out of adversaries

³⁵ Ibid.

and promote generally stability. He obviously did not cotton to democratic peace theory in any way, and did not give merit to the position that illiberal regimes promote instability by their repressive actions. He did not give any mention to what the US would do for internal conflicts aside from criticizing the actions of the Obama administration. One can deduce that he felt that other nations civil wars were not the business of the US, even if they did not lead to the stability he desired. His final goal was to start moving the US away from international entanglements that limited American freedom of action and that were at least partially funded by taxpayers. At the time he didn't mention the traditional American warrant for isolationism, the fear of getting involved in foreign wars out of sense of pacifism. He was primarily concerned with giving the US as much freedom of action as it could acquire, and to avoid using dollars for anything that did not directly contribute to US power.

On the whole his original thesis on foreign policy would not change substantially. There were some evolutions in what he considered "interests" that would follow later, as well as shifts in emphasis. However, his overall goal of putting "America First" through husbanding economic resources and expanding US military capability would follow. Additionally, there were contradictions already present that would continue to characterize Trump's policies through the present day. There was the confused rhetoric calling for the US to cultivate allies and make common cause with former adversaries, yet there was also his adamant position that the US had been taken advantage of by its allies and that US should remove itself from agreements that limit its freedom of action. This was even more glaring when one considers that one of his key criticism of President Obama was that he had, "picked fights with our oldest friends" and driven former allies away from the US sphere.³⁶ His vision of exactly how US – Ally relationships would work was limited to exclaiming that, "a Trump administration will lead a free world that is properly armed and funded."³⁷ Such a statement indicated that Trump only cared to make allies of those who were military strong and invested in defense; a view in opposition to over 60 years of US policy. That this statement was immediately followed by a lament that allies of the US were beginning to lose

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

confidence in American resolve is enough to induce whiplash in the abrupt change in tone and message.

Following Trump's victory and inauguration in February 2017, the next major foreign policy speech he made was to the United Nations in September 2017. In the meantime, through his tweets and statements he had focused much of his energy on North Korea, the Iran Nuclear Agreement, defeating ISIS, and US policy in Afghanistan. These issues along with an updated articulation of his foreign policy vision, were all part of his speech to the General Assembly. His speech was very much in the Trump style, in that it was rambling and jumped from topics so quickly that one could quickly lose track of where the President was going with his thoughts. Yet, it is clear that having been in office and having assembled his cabinet and advisors, that there was more discipline imposed on his thinking. He offered some structure to his vision by declaring that "we have a policy of principled realism, rooted in shared goals, interests, and values."³⁸ This "principled realism" he articulated would become his explanation for both his foreign policy and security strategies. Unfortunately, this school of thought, as he envisioned it was not very clearly defined. He explained it as follows:

"We must protect our nations, their interests, and their futures. We must reject threats to sovereignty, from the Ukraine to the South China Sea. We must uphold respect for law, respect for borders, and respect for culture, and the peaceful engagement these allow. And just as the founders of this body intended, we must work together and confront together those who threaten us with chaos, turmoil, and terror."³⁹

There is little here that differentiates his principled realism from the majority of philosophies of international relations, to include liberalism. Protecting national interests and sovereignty constitutes about as concise an explanation of the Westphalian State System as can be imagined. Yet, he immediately followed up his enumeration of sovereignty as the highest principle in international relations with attacks on traditional

³⁸ Donald J Trump, Speech to the UN General Assembly, 19 September 2017, New York, Available at <https://www.politico.com/story/2017/09/19/trump-un-speech-2017-full-text-transcript-242879>, Accessed 15 April 2019.

³⁹ Ibid.

American enemies North Korea and Iran, threatening to “utterly destroy”⁴⁰ the former if necessary, and for the rest of the world’s governments to demand the cessation of the nuclear program of the latter. This inherent contradiction, sovereignty for all nations unless their actions run counter to American interests, appears to be the foundation of principled realism. He followed up his criticism of Iran and North Korea by labeling the Assad Regime in Syria as “criminal” and therefore presumably illegitimate, and then lauding American sanctions against Venezuela which he implied were imposed because of its socialist economic system. Where did sovereignty go? It seems the “principled” part of his realism only applies to nations that his administration approves of, as one could label any number of regimes “criminal” for oppressing its citizens or running a failing economy. Moreover, his realism which holds nation states as the primary actors in the international system whose sovereignty is paramount, is apparently overridden by idealism when it suits his needs. “But the powerful people in this room, under the guidance and auspices of the United Nations, can solve many of these vicious and complex problems,”⁴¹ he said of international issues like poverty and war. The idea that the United Nations is an effective actor that it *should* be vested with that kind of power runs counter to his previous outlook. Moreover, his realism is also undercut by his appeals to idealism. “When decent people and nations become bystanders to history, the forces of destruction only gather power and strength countless more” is a statement that it is incredibly difficult to square with his notions of near absolute sovereignty and previous criticism of interventionism. One wonders upon what else he imagines previous US interventions were predicated on. His final statement, that “we will fight together, sacrifice together, and stand together for peace, for freedom, for justice, for family, for humanity, and for the almighty God who made us all” is even hard to square with his general lack of enthusiasm for foreign cooperation and conflict. Possibly the best interpretation of his speech seems to be that “principled realism” is a sort of idealistic realism; a contradiction in terms. It is likely true however that, like many of the President’s speeches and statements, this speech was aimed at least partially at his political base which makes it more politicking than policy. The most important

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

statements on international security are contained in policy documents like the NSS which are aimed not at voters but the bureaucracy.

The *National Security Strategy* (NSS) leads the way in defining US strategy as the first document to emerge from the Trump administrations inter-agency processes. The NSS lays the groundwork in defining the strategic outlook and interests of the United States. It begins by claiming that its analysis is “based on American principles” and “a clear-eyed assessment of U.S. interests.”⁴² Most importantly, the assessment claims that it is made in accordance with “principled realism that is guided by outcomes, not ideology.”⁴³ Leaving aside the rhetorical flourish about ideology, the NSS is already showing it’s hand in terms of how their strategic thinking influences their worldview and conception of American interests. Again, “principled realism” is seen as the guiding force. However there remains a fundamental contraction: how does one determine what outcomes are best sans any ideology? Along with the common rhetoric about peace and prosperity, the NSS puts down a stake in its first page to defend the idea of sovereignty. Although buried in the standard rhetoric about a peaceful and just world, sovereignty is also claimed to be embodied in values of the United States, and that administration will “protect American sovereignty by defending these institutions, traditions, and principles that have allowed us to live in freedom, to build the nation that we love.” It is possible that this rhetoric is simply for political show, but sovereignty will be mentioned repeatedly in this document and others. It is clear that the administration believes that there is some kind of threat to the sovereignty of the United States, even if it fails to enumerate just quite what that threat is. Moreover, sovereignty as the cornerstone of the Trump policy is an odd choice in that his principled realism, as explained in his 2017 UN speech, leaves open a lot of room to violate the sovereignty of others. The “principled” part remains an issue.

The NSS however takes a turn on it’s second page. After basking in the successes of America’s past, which included building an order that promoted security and prosperity and included institutions such as NATO,⁴⁴ the NSS makes the assertion

⁴² United States and Donald Trump, 2017. *National security strategy of the United States: The White House*, Pg. 1.

⁴³ Ibid, Pg. 1.

⁴⁴ Ibid, Pg. 2 .

that the world situation has changed to the disadvantage of the US. Citing both a crisis of confidence and hubris all at once as the cause of American decline, the NSS argues that the US “took our political, economic, and military advantages for granted, other actors steadily implemented their long-term plans to challenge America.”⁴⁵ The NSS claims that non-adversary nations also undermined and took advantage of institutions that the US built, an allusion to NATO. The main thrust of the complaint about the US falling behind competitors however, is in the economic realm, and while the document enumerates economic measures such as subsidies and technology transfers which eroded US economic dominance, the rest of the complaints are standard Chicago-school type harping about government regulations. The important salient point of this part of the NSS is that the administration feels that the US once yielded near hegemonic power, and that it no longer believes that this is so. The main reason is competition. Additionally, when explaining economic competition, the *NSS* states the following:

“The United States helped expand the liberal economic trading system to countries that did not share our values, in the hopes that these states would liberalize their economic and political practices and provide commensurate benefits to the United States. Experience shows that these countries distorted and undermined key economic institutions without undertaking significant reform of their economies or politics. They espouse free trade rhetoric and exploit its benefits, but only adhere selectively to the rules and agreements.”⁴⁶

This is a rejection of decades of previous administration’s policy concerning expanding trade and economic access to countries like Russia and China, which Trump argued in his 2016 speech was a mistake. The strategic thinking before him held that bringing undemocratic countries into the international system would speed up their democratization. The underlying idea is that economic success will lead to a larger and stronger middle class in these nations and that the middle class, having both education and the time to have an interest in public affairs, will push for reform.

⁴⁵ Ibid, Pg. 2

⁴⁶ Ibid, Pg. 17.

Moreover, bringing such nations into the market means the importation of media products that could promote democratic thinking. Of course, there are caveats, mostly centered around how broadly the wealth is shared, but this has generally held true.⁴⁷ The Trump administration rejects this line of thinking, and makes an argument that such policies have increased the wealth and power of American adversaries who have manipulated the system to their favor. While not necessarily under the rubric of security policy, this view will likely have profound implications for how the Trump administration engages with China, who it sees as the main economic villain, and to a lesser extent Russia.

Competition is at the core of US strategic thinking, as enumerated by the NSS. It immediately calls out both the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China as economic, military, and political adversaries. It sees the international situation as being one of competition between states. However, the US has lost its hegemonic advantage and allowed its adversaries to grow strong enough to challenge its strength. This is a multipolar world that is being described. Although states like North Korea and Iran are mentioned as destabilizing actors, the most intense competition happens among 'great power' competitors such as Russia and China. It is the belief of the Trump administration that the US can only confront such competition from a "position of Strength." The threats posed by renewed competition are enumerated in a section covering "Strategy in a Regional Context."⁴⁸ The administration gives special attention and emphasis on Europe, the Middles East, and the Indo Pacific in the NSS as these are the regions where the administration believes the United States has lost the most ground to competitors. In Europe, Russia is the obvious threat to American interests and it is called out for violating the sovereignty of both Georgia and Ukraine, as well as what the administration characterizes as provocative forward deployments of its nuclear weapons. China also receives a nod due to its economic penetration of Europe, as well as a destabilized middle east. The Indo Pacific strategy is dominated by China. As in

⁴⁷ See Daniel Griswold, "Trade Democracy and Peace: The Virtuous Cycle," speech to "Peace Through Trade" Conference, World Trade Centers Association, Oslo, Norway for a presentation of his findings on the positive correlation between trade and civil liberty, 20 April 2007, available through *The CATO Institute*, at <https://www.cato.org/publications/speeches/trade-democracy-peace-virtuous-cycle>.

⁴⁸ NSS, Pg. 45.

Europe, China's economic practices are considered damaging to US interests, however the People's Republic is also criticized for its militarization of the South China Sea, and it's growing military potential. The Middle East is seen as a destabilizing force in general and as potential breeding ground for transnational Islamic terrorism.

Following several months after the *NSS*, the *National Defense Strategy (NDS)*, offers a more in depth look at the strategic situation from the perspective of the Department of Defense (DoD). The NDS claims that the United States has allowed its strategic power to atrophy.⁴⁹ While this can either be seen as boilerplate preparation for increasing the defense budget, or a continuation of the administration's demonization of everything Trump's predecessor did, there is an element of truth involved. The United States has been at war for almost eighteen years on multiple fronts. The strain on both equipment and manpower has absolutely had an effect on core competencies⁵⁰, although just how much and which service branches is a matter for debate. However, the Trump administration is loath to admit that war itself has been bad for readiness, fails to explain the erosion of military power, and blithely asserts imagined dominance; "For decades the United States has enjoyed uncontested or dominant superiority in every operating domain. We could generally deploy our forces when we wanted, assemble them where we wanted, and operate how we wanted. Today, every domain is contested—air, land, sea, space, and cyberspace."⁵¹ In a strictly military sense, this was never true. The US always depended on allied bases and agreements to deploy and assemble their forces. This has been true from the Korean War through the current day. Instead of restoring US strength to its former capability, the *NDS* wants to greatly expand American power to a level that it never enjoyed even at its zenith.

Second, the NDS states that, "the central challenge to U.S. prosperity and security is the *reemergence of long-term, strategic competition* by what the National

⁴⁹ United States, Congress, "National Defense Strategy." *National Defense Strategy*, Department of Defense, 2018. Pg. 1.

⁵⁰ See Harrison, Todd, "Impact of the Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan on the US Military's Plans, Programs and Budgets," *Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments*, 2009, for a study of the impact of American wars on readiness, force structure, and equipment.

⁵¹ *NDS*, Pg 2.

Security Strategy classifies as revisionist powers.”⁵² The NDS clearly calls out both Russia and China as adversaries who have separate goals that mutually threaten American interests. Additionally, it claims that both want to challenge the existing power structure of the world in order to gain “veto authority over other nations’ economic, diplomatic, and security decisions.”⁵³ These lines, and the emphasis given to both China and Russia in the rest of the document, constitute about as clear a statement that can be made elucidating the belief that not only is great power competition back, but that the US has worthy adversaries once more. Like the NSS, the NDS also notes that Iran and North Korea present threats to American security interests, but they are not viewed as great powers like China and Russia. They are not revisionists in terms of regional hegemony, but merely “rogues”: nations that can destabilize their own regions, but have relatively little ability to reach beyond their area of the world.

In summation, the Trump administration sees the world in a state of renewed great power competition. American power has atrophied over the past several decades due to irresponsible wars in the middle east that sapped the US of both blood and treasure, the negligence of previous administrations in regards to funding the military, and a general lack of clarity or vision on behalf of American leaders. The Trump administration also believes that American allies have taken advantage of the United States and are a liability, while at the same time still recognizing that alliances can serve American power; if the allies act in the interest of the US. Above all, and as stated time and time again, the Trump administration believes that sovereignty is the cornerstone of its policy, and that any institution, be it trade regimes or alliances, that limits American freedom of action is deleterious to American sovereignty.

Although the worldview is at least coherent: it is one of *realpolitik*; sovereignty must be upheld and the US must act on its interests, it is lacking in some areas. The main problems arise with the Trump fixation on sovereignty and its view of allies. First, the sovereignty of states has been a bedrock principle of the international system since 1648. When a state violates the sovereignty of another nation, that has historically

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

meant an act of war. Although sovereignty was never absolute, the principle of accepting that states manage their own affairs free of interference has only gotten stronger as history has continued. The only legitimate loophole in the current international system to violate another state's sovereignty is in order to protect another state's population from atrocities in the so-called "Right to protect doctrine."⁵⁴ The idea that US sovereignty is somehow under attack or threatened is not supported by empirical evidence. One must ask, who is doing this and how? The Trump administration is not clear. Instead it heavily implies that the various treaties, agreements, and alliances that the US is party to infringe upon its sovereignty. This is true in a sense, and it is heavily dependent on the instrument in question, but it is also incredibly banal. Of course, in an alliance one has to cooperate and in that sense a state will give up some of its freedom to act, but this is hardly deleterious to its sovereign authority. Moreover, protecting the sovereignty of the nation has always been deeper than an interest for US Presidents, it has been axiomatic.

This hyperventilating about sovereignty also deeply confuses the Trump administration's view of allies and interests. As mentioned, when a nation enters into agreements with other nations, it incurs responsibilities. That the administration feels that it should press NATO members to spend more on their respective militaries, which is neither novel or unique to Trump, is one thing. President Obama was also adamant that European and NATO allies should increase their defense budgets in order to be more effective military partners.⁵⁵ However, one can read the administration's views about sovereignty and the "unfairness" of the international system as meaning that the administration believes that it can achieve agreements that only incur benefits to US interests without any responsibilities. Given Trump's purported faith in his own ability as a negotiator, perhaps he actually believes this is possible. However, it is very unlikely. Moreover, the thinking here seems muddled; previous administrations have always

⁵⁴ For a brief summary of sovereignty as an international principle, see Amitai Etzioni, "Defining Down Sovereignty: The Rights and Responsibilities of Nations," *Ethics in International Affairs* Website, March 2016, available at <https://www.ethicsandinternationalaffairs.org/2016/defining-sovereignty-rights-responsibilities-nations/>

⁵⁵ Tomiuc, Eugen, "Obama calls for EU Unity, More Collective Defense Spending," *Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty*, 25 April 2016, available at <https://www.rferl.org/a/obama-european-unity-nato-defense-russia-sanctions/27695322.html>

entered into alliances and agreements when they felt it was in the American interest. Politicians can disagree over what a nation's interests are or what serves the interest best, but no one ever enters into agreements not perceived to be in their nation's interest. The only exception is when nations are coerced, and it's difficult to imagine the US being coerced in this way. Acting only in one's interest is axiomatic.

Despite this confusion and the elevation of axioms of international relations to the status of foreign policy goals, the Trump worldview is broadly coherent. Given this world view of renewed competition between rivals and American decline, one could certainly characterize his worldview as being multipolar. The main issue is that President Trump has characterized his strategy of one "principled realism" based on US interests. Yet, aside from sovereignty and rebuilding American power, his speeches and documents are vague about what those interests are. Stability takes precedence over democratization or human rights; that much is clear. Yet aside from that a lot is left to the imagination. The primary American interest appears to be preserving hegemonic-levels of power, but to what end he intends to use such power is left unclear. Additionally, despite the isolationist overtones of his "America First" worldview, he appears to be committed to international institutions as long as they serve US interests. Lacking additional information about what these interests are can leave one with the conclusion that American interests are whatever the president believes about a particular issue at a particular time. Whatever is adjudicated to serve US a power dynamic that favors the United States is considered an interest. It is a worldview wherein power is its own end.

Trump's Strategy

In response to the reemergence of a multipolar world and perceived US decline, the Trump administration has identified policies to compete with it's rivals and secure American interests. The *NSS* offers the most succinct set of priorities enumerated in four "pillars" of strategy as follows:

- Protect the American Homeland, the American People and the American way of life.⁵⁶
- Promote American Prosperity.⁵⁷
- Promote Peace Through Strength.⁵⁸
- Advance American Influence.⁵⁹

The first pillar covers issues that constitute a grab-bag of domestic security threats that originate outside of American borders. These include WMD proliferation both from states and non-state actors, pandemics and disease, immigration, transnational crime, terrorism, and cyber-attacks. The most relevant of these threats for the purposes of this paper is WMD proliferation, as the document describes Chinese and Russian technological advancements in their weapons technology as threats to the American homeland.⁶⁰ To combat this threat the *NSS* describes for priorities of action which include enhancing missile defense, detecting and disrupting WMD (which in this context refers to terrorism), enhance counter-proliferation measures, and targeting WMD terrorists. The document takes care to explain that “Enhanced missile defense is not intended to undermine strategic stability or disrupt longstanding strategic relationships with Russia or China.”

The second pillar covers economic rejuvenation measures that the President wants to engage in. While largely ancillary to security policy, this pillar does mention that United States needs to keep its technological edge by protecting its National Security Innovation Base (NSIB). The main point of the pillar is that it both jibes with Trump’s campaign rhetoric concerning economic competition, particularly in regards to China, and serves US security interests by providing, it is hoped, a larger war chest with which to expand military expenditures.

⁵⁶ *NSS*, Pg. 7.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, Pg. 17.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, Pg. 25.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, Pg. 37.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, Pg., 8.

By far the most important and germane pillar is the one titled, “Preserve Peace through Strength.”⁶¹ This pillar can be seen as the distillation of the Trump view of international relations. The President sees military power as the primary currency in international relations, with economic prosperity being the means through which the nation can secure military power. Believing that the US military has atrophied, the administration explains that it wants to revitalize its strength in order to gain dominance over any and all rivals.

“The United States must retain overmatch—the combination of capabilities in sufficient scale to prevent enemy success and to ensure that America’s sons and daughters will never be in a fair fight. Overmatch strengthens our diplomacy and permits us to shape the international environment to protect our interests. To retain military overmatch the United States must restore our ability to produce innovative capabilities, restore the readiness of our forces for major war, and grow the size of the force so that it is capable of operating at sufficient scale and for ample duration to win across a range of scenarios.”⁶²

Not wanting to engage in a “fair fight” is nothing new; one can look to Sun Tzu to find the origin of that principle of war. However, gaining a generalized “overmatch” capability over all potential rivals at all times is more than ambitious. The ambitiousness of this scale of dominance is clear when the documents states that “the Joint Force must remain capable of deterring and defeating the full range of threats to the United States.”⁶³ This is referring to full spectrum dominance, which includes the ability to fight and win irregular wars while still being prepared to win a conventional battle, in addition to opening up space and the cyber domain as further potential theaters of conflict. Given that the cause of atrophied competencies of the US military can be placed squarely on the prolonged irregular wars that the US is still fighting, this is almost breathtakingly ambitious. It is also reiterated in the *NDS*, which states, “our aim is a Joint Force that possesses decisive advantages for any likely conflict, while remaining

⁶¹ Ibid, Pg. 25.

⁶² Ibid, Pg. 28

⁶³ Ibid, Pg. 29.

proficient across the entire spectrum of conflict.”⁶⁴ This in practical terms, means the administration remains committed to a military that fight both conventional conflicts and counter insurgency operations without the need for significant retooling of it’s military. The fundamental issue is that US has never been able to do both of these things well, as indicated by experience in both Vietnam and Iraq/Afghanistan⁶⁵. This means that hard decisions need to be made about what capabilities the US should develop in a world with limited resources. These decisions are made based on interests and the likely manner in which those interests would be threatened. Are US interests primarily threatened by the possibility of conventional war or irregular war? Trump’s strategy appears to see threats in every corner, which is not necessarily incorrect, but fails to triage the threats and prioritize action. It wants to be fully prepared for all possibilities.

To this end, creating a military that maintains full spectrum dominance over all its rivals in all domains, the Trump administration has taken the tangible steps of increasing the defense budget 10% for fiscal year 2018 to \$700 billion, and again in FY 2019 by 2.3% to \$719 billion.⁶⁶ This was followed by an overall National defense budget of \$750 billion for FY 2020 that was submitted in December 2018. The important point about the FY 2020 budget increase was the context in which it was made. During late 2018, President Trump had been looking for 5% reduction across the board in all public spending, and tweeted that the \$716 billion he had approved in for 2019 was “crazy”⁶⁷ while characterizing the increase in spending as part of as yet undeclared arms race between the US and Russia and China. This matters in that despite what the President was saying publicly, and possibly for political effect, when the time came to make a decision that resulted in a real policy output, Trump defaulted to increasing the budget. Whatever was happening inside the administration, the result was perfectly in line what

⁶⁴ Ibid, Pg. 5.

⁶⁵ Austin Long, “Doctrine of Eternal Recurrence: The U.S. Military and Counterinsurgency Doctrine, 1960–1970 and 2003–2006, *RAND Corporation*, 2008, available at https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/occasional_papers/2008/RAND_OP200.pdf , Pg. 27.

⁶⁶ Lyra Seligman, “In Reversal Trump Signals Further Boost in Defense Spending,” *Foreign Policy*, 27 December 2018, available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/12/27/in-reversal-trump-signals-further-boost-in-defense-spending-pentagon-iraq/>

⁶⁷ Donald Trump (realDonaldTrump), “I am certain that, at some time in the future, President Xi and I, together with President Putin of Russia, will start talking about a meaningful halt to what has become a major and uncontrollable Arms Race. The U.S. spent 716 Billion Dollars this year. Crazy!” 3 December 2018, 530 a.m., Tweet.

had been in happening in terms of military strength from beginning of his tenure: increasing American military power. What these budget increases have meant for the American military has been increased acquisitions of military hardware and modernizing the organizational infrastructure of the military and its supporting bureaucracy.

However, in both the *NSS* and the *NDS*, military strength is not the only element of power considered. It is quite telling that the *NSS* places “Diplomacy and Statecraft” under the pillar of Peace through strength as a subheading.⁶⁸ One could certainly read this placement as a strategic signal to the bureaucracy: diplomacy is subordinate to military power. Indeed, this seems to be the case. While the strategy characterizes diplomacy as a way to secure American goals without military involvement, it still sees diplomacy as being “competitive”⁶⁹ and puts its diplomatic priorities in military terms. The US must retain a “forward diplomatic presence” and diplomats should engage in “forward-deployed field work.”⁷⁰ It is the job of diplomats to “advance American interest” by building coalitions that advance shared interests, and to “catalyze opportunities,” whatever that is supposed to mean. That diplomacy is a tool for advancing a nation’s interests is axiomatic, however it is clear through both its placement in the strategy and the language used to describe it that diplomacy is relegated to a supporting role. This is even more clear when one considers that while the military budget has steadily increased under the Trump president, the State Department’s budget has been drastically cut each year, to the tune of between 20% and 28%, and mostly to foreign aid programs⁷¹. Soft power is not favored by this administration.

Given this, one might ask how diplomats are supposed to create the kind of influence needed to achieve American aims. According to the *NSS*, the answer appears to be economic warfare, or at the very least coercion. In what might be one of the more incoherent passages from the strategy, the goal of “economic diplomacy” appears to be both securing US dominance in the economic realm and simultaneously increasing the

⁶⁸ *NSS*, pg. 33.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ Robbie Gramer and Colum Lynch, “Despite Pompeo’s Calls for ‘Swagger,’ Trump Slashes Diplomatic Budget,” *Foreign Policy*, 11 March 2019, available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/03/11/trump-federal-budget-steep-cuts-to-state-department-foreign-aid-development-diplomacy-pompeo/>

economic strength of American partners. However, despite the vague “reinforce economic ties” with American allies, the only measures available to diplomats are severing funds and deploying economic pressure⁷²; i.e. sanctions. In keeping with the militarized version of diplomacy currently on tap, the tools at the disposal of US diplomats appear to be all stick and no carrot. Moreover, the goal to build “a community of free markets”⁷³ is contrary a strategic outlook which holds that the current system, which is based on free markets, has been to the detriment of the US. It is a contradiction. One final point about diplomacy is that the NSS covers information diplomacy to the extent that it affirms that Russian information operations have been effective. However, there is nothing of substance at all offered to counter this threat, and in fact the strategy all but takes US diplomacy out of the question by declaring, “the private sector should lend its creativity and resources to promoting the values that inspire and grow a community of civilized groups and individuals.”⁷⁴ While it is true that a state can leverage it’s private sectors to further achieve it’s interests, this essentially amounts to buck passing.

Having gutted the State Department’s ability to operate through deep budget cuts, and relegating diplomacy to the second league of American institutions, one might wonder how the pillar of “Advance American Influence” is supposed to achieve its goals. Yet, despite the rhetoric of President concerning NATO, the *NSS* recognizes that American partnerships and alliances have been a “great strength of the United States. They add directly to U.S. political, economic, military, intelligence, and other capabilities.”⁷⁵ It takes great pride in America’s record of coalition building and economic development over the past 70 years. However, in terms of what tools the administration wants to use in order to advance American interests, it has limited itself. The *NSS* renounced the use of grants and aid money in favor of private capital. Where this capital is supposed to come from for states that are already fragile or developing is not explored. The administration views development assistance as transactional; it wants to

⁷² *NSS*, Pg. 34.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, Pg. 39.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, Pg. 37.

only use such aid for countries that support the national interests of the United States.⁷⁶ This kind of thinking betrays an inability to see the development of nations as in the US interest. At the very least the cognitive dissonance between putting a premium on stable governments in general, and only dispensing support to those who serve American interests must be noted.

In one of the most whiplash inducing sections, the *NSS* offers priority actions for the US to advance American values. The contradiction of this goal, to spread American values, with both the internal logic of the *NSS* and the President's previous statements can not be ignored. The *NSS* states, "We are not going to impose our values on others,"⁷⁷ as a principle of growing American influence. This is perfectly in line with Donald Trump's aversion to previous American interventions, especially in the Middle East. However, in the very same pillar it lays out instructions on how to do exactly that. In order to support the dignity of individuals, the *NSS* explains that the US reserves the right to "use diplomacy, sanctions, and other tools to isolate states and leaders who threaten our interests and whose actions run contrary to our values," and that, "We will hold perpetrators of genocide and mass atrocities accountable."⁷⁸ Moreover, in order to reduce human suffering "the United States will continue to lead the world in humanitarian assistance."⁷⁹ This commitment to human rights is buried in the final paragraph of the final pillar, yet that does not ease the inherent contradictions. The US will not impose its values except when it will. The US is committed to humanitarian aid to ease suffering, while at the same time it slashes the budgets of the very agencies, the State Department – especially USAID, who manage that aid. One might counter by claiming that not imposing US values on others implies not using military force. However, with the cryptic phrase "other tools," the *NSS* still reserves the right of the US to do so. How can one explain this?

Perhaps this is the President's "principled realism" in action. President Trump appears to be committed to a policy based solely on interests and not, as he puts it,

⁷⁶ Ibid, pg. 39.

⁷⁷ Ibid, Pg. 37.

⁷⁸ Ibid, Pg. 42.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

ideology. These interests are supposed to be driven by outcomes. This is the realism; a *realpolitik* wherein stability of the system is prized in so far as it serves American power. Partners and allies can be any nation with shared interests who are willing to play by the rules the US lays down. Yet there remains the “principled” modifier. What is principled about the Trump realism? Apparently, it means that the US is still committed to promoting democracy and human rights, in *some fashion*, but only *when it is in American interests* to do so. This in effect means the US can pick and choose where it wants to support ideals, which it has always done, but can still act in a consistent manner. If the US champions it’s values in one case but not the other, it’s merely because it did not believe it was worth the effort to do so. This begins to make more sense if one takes that both the Trump view of international relations and the power of its own values literally. Trump views the world as one of renewed competition, especially with Russia and China. Trump’s NSS also touts American values as the reason for its strength. The US is strong because of its civil liberties and style of free market capitalism⁸⁰. Why would one expend effort to improve one’s competitors? Oversimplified this may be, but Trump and his administration also believe that Chinese WTO membership was a mistake⁸¹. Granted, this interpretation is *ad absurdum*, however it does follow the internal logic of President Trump’s views on international relations and the strength of the US system. More likely is that Trump’s principled realism means that the US will exercise the promotion of its values on a case by case basis, when the administration believes it serves the US interest to do so. Moreover, this also means that administration will use human rights and democracy promotion as a rhetorical tool to bludgeon its enemies in the public sphere. It already does so in all policy documents covering Iran, North Korea, Russia, and China. Yet it refrains from mentioning US allies, such as Saudi Arabia or Turkey, in favor of promoting stability. Again, this is nothing new.

⁸⁰ Ibid, Pg. 37.

⁸¹ United States Trade Representative, “2018 Report to Congress on China’s WTO Compliance, “ February 2019, available at <https://ustr.gov/sites/default/files/2018-USTR-Report-to-Congress-on-China%27s-WTO-Compliance.pdf>, Pg. 5.

That the Trump administration wants to use its values as a stick to beat its adversaries with becomes apparent when one considers how the Trump administration views the multilateral environment. International institutions, like the rest of the international system, are grounds where nations compete for influence⁸². In order to further American interests, the US will take an utterly transactional approach to its conduct concerning international institutions by “prioritizing its efforts in those organizations that serve American interests, to ensure that they are strengthened and supportive of the United States, our allies, and our partners.”⁸³ The Trump administration remains committed to distancing itself from any agreement or institution that it feels infringes on American sovereignty, of course. Most importantly, the *NSS* reveals how the administration feels about international institutions when it claims that it must exercise leadership in such institutions through budgetary blackmail: “If the United States is asked to provide a disproportionate level of support for an institution, we will expect a commensurate degree of influence over the direction and efforts of that institution.”⁸⁴ In essence, the Trump administration believes that it can buy influence in the United Nations through patronage. While all nations effectively compete by jockeying for influence within international institutions, the Trump administration only sees these institutions as valuable so as they serve American interests.

The Nuclear Situation

Having covered how the administration views the grand strategic picture for the US, we can focus on nuclear policy. The Trump presidency sees the world in renewed competition, with US struggling to retain hegemony. In order to keep this hegemony, the Trump administration wants to lean heavily on military power, and to a lesser extent it’s economic muscle. But how does the administration view nuclear weapons? While this element of national power can be categorized with general military power, their massive destructive potential makes them a tool of their own category. We can start with the words of Donald Trump himself, who tweeted in December 2016,

⁸² *NSS*, pg. 40.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

“The United States must greatly strengthen and expand its nuclear capability until such time as the world comes to its senses regarding nukes.”⁸⁵

Now one must be careful about the seriousness of the president’s tweets. However, in this instance Trump’s statement has been backed up by policy proposals and actions that jibe with his sentiments. The idea that the US is in a situation where it needs to renew its nuclear capabilities as well as expanding its arsenal is a common thread in the Trump administration’s various outputs. Although he had made various statements about foreign policy and US Security before, this tweet was the first instance of him directly addressing US nuclear capabilities. What “the world com[ing] to its senses” means is anyone’s guess, but there was no mistaking his desire to renew emphasis on the nuclear deterrent.

Both the *NSS* and the *NDS* offer some insight on how the US views its nuclear weapons. Nested within “Peace through Strength,” the nuclear arm is categorized as in need of renewal and highlighted for future budget requests. The importance of the nuclear arsenal in American strategy is made very clear, in that it is considered “the foundation of our strategy to preserve peace and stability by deterring aggression against the United States, our allies, and our partners.”⁸⁶ Labeling nuclear weapons as the foundation of US deterrence strategy is a departure in terms of their emphasis, the Obama administration was looking forward to a world without nuclear weapons⁸⁷, but the *NSS* does admit that nuclear weapons do not have a universal ability to deter all conflict. Having made clear the importance of nuclear weapons, the *NSS* laments the current state of the US arsenal,

“Following the Cold War, the United States reduced investments in our nuclear enterprise and reduced the role of nuclear weapons in our strategy. Some parts of America’s strategic nuclear Triad of bombers, sea-based missiles, and land-based

⁸⁵ Donald Trump (realDonaldTrump), “The United States must greatly strengthen and expand its nuclear capability until such time as the world comes to its senses regarding nukes,” 5:50 p.m. 22 December 2016, Tweet, available at <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/811977223326625792?lang=en>

⁸⁶ *NSS*, Pg. 30.

⁸⁷ United States, 2010, *Nuclear posture review report*, (Washington, DC: U.S. Dept. of Defense) <http://purl.access.gpo.gov/GPO/LPS121566>., Pg. iii.

missiles are over 30 years old, and much of our nuclear infrastructure dates to the World War II era.”⁸⁸

This is the same lament that Donald Trump has made about the general state of both the US economy and military. All the sources of American power are in need of renewal, and the nuclear deterrent is no exception. Moreover, the *NSS* mentions that the Russian Federation and China have expanded both their arsenals and delivery capabilities.⁸⁹ In order to keep a credible deterrent option, the administration calls for a general reinvestment in all arms of the nuclear triad as well as implementing new technologies to keep up with its adversaries. The *NSS* is not specific about what or where to invest in. However, there are a couple of interesting statements that reveal some of the administrations strategic thinking. Despite arguing for a general need to increase investment, the *NSS* does not argue for growing the arsenal. The desired measures describe general actions that will sustain the current stockpile, but with perhaps advanced capabilities. In fact, the *NSS* says that “the United States does not need to match the nuclear arsenals of other powers,”⁹⁰ which means that the United States does not need to match its adversaries warhead for warhead. This means that, in the *NSS*, the administration is signaling that it feels it has an effective deterrent, at least in terms of the warheads it already has. The main changes called for involve general modernization to the nuclear infrastructure, command and control systems, and development of a skilled workforce. The administration does remain open to potential arms reductions, but is wary about the reliability of compliance regimes, “We will consider new arms control arrangements if they contribute to strategic stability and if they are verifiable.” There is a bit of hedging in that statement, and possibly some overlap with the President’s opinions on Iran, but the administration has signaled that it is open to reductions, even if it does not see them as a goal.

The *NDS* says very little about nuclear weapons that has not already been said elsewhere:

⁸⁸ *NSS*, Pg. 30

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ *ibid*

“The Department will modernize the nuclear triad—including nuclear command, control, and communications, and supporting infrastructure. Modernization of the nuclear force includes developing options to counter competitors’ coercive strategies, predicated on the threatened use of nuclear or strategic non-nuclear attacks.”⁹¹

It’s clear that the administration was saving its powder so to speak on nuclear weapons for the *Nuclear Posture Review (NPR)* which was developed concurrently and released the following month. The *NPR*, published in February 2018, offers a succinct, if unclassified, summation of how the US views nuclear weapons both in terms of the threats they face, and how nuclear weapons fit into their own policy. In the preface to the unclassified version, written by then Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis, he lays out the strategic situation in nuclear terms. Again, “great power competition”⁹² is back as both Russia and China are pointed out for the revisionist tendencies. However, in this document, their nuclear capabilities have been highlighted and presented as emerging threats to the United States, which has generally been on glide path for nuclear reduction since the 1980s. The Russian Federation is accused of modernizing its nuclear systems (as if the US has not been doing the same), but is also said to have “adopt[ed] military strategies and capabilities that rely on nuclear escalation for their success.”⁹³ This is the first official use of what we will refer to “escalate to deescalate.” It is a policy that some American policy thinkers believe that the Russian Federation has to use tactical nuclear weapons in a conventional conflict as a way to end the fighting in their favor. I will cover this more later, but it is important to remember while there is debate over whether or not such a doctrine actually exists, DoD and administration officials clearly believe that it is a fact. China is also accused of modernization and expansion regimes in their nuclear program, and to boot is not party to any of the nuclear reduction treaties that the United States and Russian Federation have signed. North Korea and Iran are considered potential, but lower level threats. The main driving rationale behind much of the US nuclear strategy is uncertainty. The *NPR* identifies two

⁹¹ *NDS*, Pg. 6.

⁹² United States. 2018. *Nuclear posture review report*. Washington, DC: U.S. Dept. of Defense. <https://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=807875>, Pg. 1.

⁹³ 2018 *NPR*, Pg. I.

types of uncertainty: geopolitical and technological.⁹⁴ Geopolitical uncertainty captures the inability of US planners to accurately predict world events with a high enough degree of confidence. Such events could lead to a realignment of world power structures to the detriment of the US, or the implosion of a nuclear state which could lead to a “proliferation cascade.”⁹⁵ Technological uncertainty refers to the rapid pace of technological change which could drastically alter the disposition of power in a short amount of time, much like Mearsheimer alludes to when he discusses nuclear competition. The *NPR* makes a veiled reference to cyber warfare having the potential to nullify US command and control systems, and to the threat posed by bioweapons.⁹⁶

Given the competitive nature of international politics and uncertainty about the future, the US sees its nuclear weapons as a foundational tool of deterrence. Then SECDEF Mattis was quoted in the *NPR* as explaining, ““a safe, secure, and effective nuclear deterrent is there to ensure a war that can never be won, is never fought.”⁹⁷ The underlying logic is not new; it means mutually assured destruction in the case of nations with larger nuclear arsenals, like China and Russia, and simply assured destruction for nations with smaller stockpiles. The US has held that although a full nuclear exchange cannot be seen as anything approaching “winnable” that such arms must be kept maintained in order to deter others. The *NPR* also places confidence in the American triad of strategic bombers, ICBMS, and SLBMS, while also emphasizing dual-capability aircraft. No part of it will be deemphasized by the current administration. Furthermore, while the administration admits that nuclear weapons have not been a completely successful deterrent for conventional aggression, they have played a role in decreasing the frequency and destructiveness of wars.⁹⁸ The Trump administration even goes as far as implying that nuclear weapons have led to reduction of casualties as visualized in the following chart,

⁹⁴ 2018 *NPR*, Pg. 14

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid., Pg. 16.

⁹⁸ Ibid.,

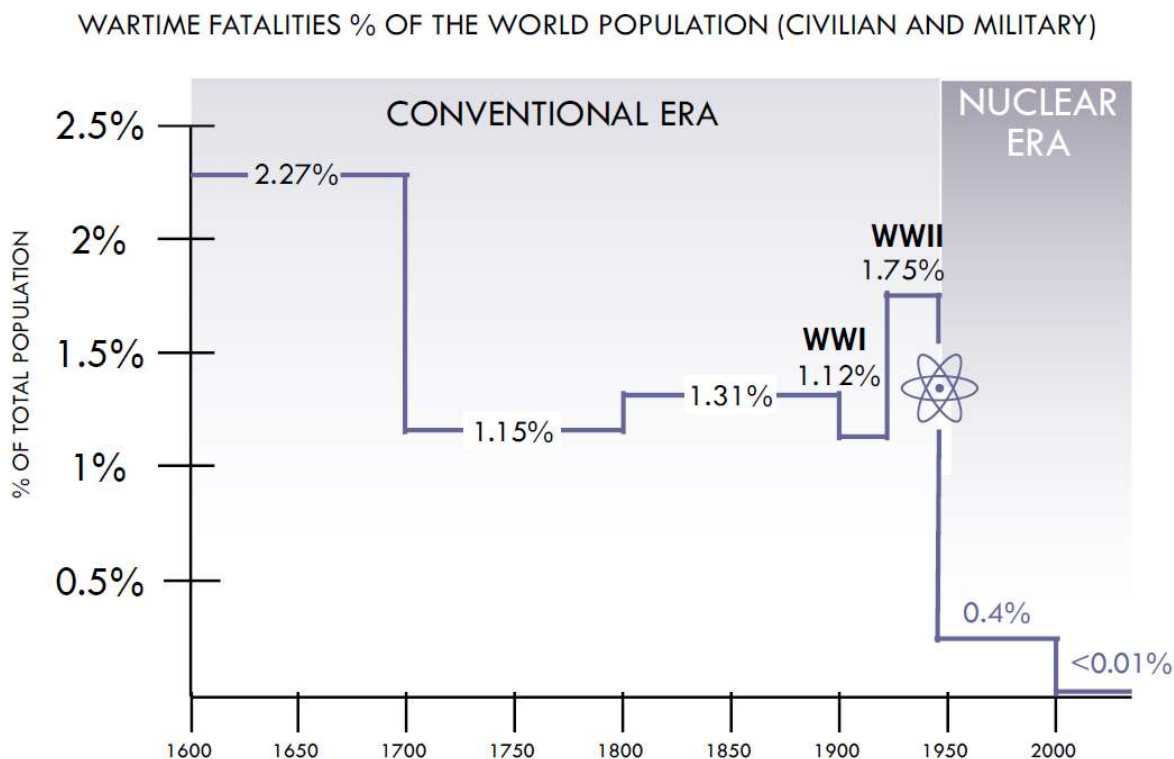


Fig 1. Wartime fatalities as a percentage of World Population as displayed in NPR.⁹⁹

The reasoning is spurious to say the least, yet it is still the case they intended to make. The American nuclear arsenal is a deterrent to both nuclear and conventional war *worldwide*, and has served to make the world a safer place. In fact, the reasoning on display goes, reducing nuclear weapons at this point would be irresponsible. Quoting a Congressional Strategic Posture Commission from 2009, the *NPR* states, “fundamental transformation of the world political order”¹⁰⁰ would be necessary before even considering the elimination of such weapons. The bottom line is that the nuclear deterrent is not going anywhere under this administration.

With nuclear weapons firmly entrenched as the primary tool of deterrence, the Department of Defense explains its nuclear strategy and the different roles nuclear weapons fill.

1. Deterrence of nuclear and non-nuclear attack

⁹⁹ Ibid, Pg. 17.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

2. Assurance of Allies and Partners
3. Achievement of Objectives if deterrence fails
4. Capacity to hedge against an uncertain future.¹⁰¹

As already stated, the primary role is deterrence and this is achieved through both having weapons with capable delivery systems and the will to use them if necessary. As then-secretary Mattis explained, US weapons will be “directed towards deterring aggression and preserving peace. Our goal is to convince adversaries they have nothing to gain and everything to lose from the use of nuclear weapons.”¹⁰² This not only assures the US, but allies of the United States who fall under the protection of the American nuclear ‘umbrella.’ However, the *NPR* is signaling that the weapons do not just exist to deter nuclear war, but to actually fight and win one if necessary. This can be taken as part and parcel of deterrence in general; if one’s adversary does not believe one will use nuclear weapons; the deterrent is no longer credible. While the Trump strategy dictates that the US will only use its weapons in “extreme”¹⁰³ circumstances, the door is left open to just what those circumstances could be. The *NPR* reaffirms the Obama pledge to not use or threaten use against NPT compliant nations, however the statement on use contains a rather large caveat:

“Given the potential of significant non-nuclear strategic attacks, the United States reserves the right to make any adjustment in the assurance that may be warranted by the evolution and proliferation of non-nuclear strategic attack technologies and U.S. capabilities to counter that threat.”¹⁰⁴

This final statement on using weapons leaves open a lot of potential ground for American nuclear weapon use. When this is combined with the long-standing America policy of non-renunciation of “no first use,” a tradition the Trump administration adheres to¹⁰⁵, reserving the right to alter American assurances is tantamount to declaring that the US does not have any fixed rules on nuclear deployment. This leaves the door wide

¹⁰¹ Ibid, Pg. 20.

¹⁰² Ibid, Pg. II.

¹⁰³ Ibid, Pg. 21

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, Pg. 22.

open for nuclear strikes in response to other WMD, conventional attacks, and the possibility of a debilitating cyber-attack.

In line with this concept and because of the uncertainty of the environment and assumption of eroded US capabilities in the face of competition, the *NPR* claims that “given the range of potential adversaries, their capabilities and strategic objectives, this review calls for a flexible, tailored nuclear deterrent strategy.”¹⁰⁶ The words “flexible” and “tailored” are the watch words for US nuclear strategy under Trump. The overall picture is one where the US has allowed its strength to atrophy while competitors have been rising. This line of thinking on nuclear policy is nested within the larger strategic and defense pictures outlined in the *NSS* and the *NDS*; the US must regather its strength in order to keep its dominance. For the nuclear arm, this mostly takes the form of increased defense spending on updating equipment. In terms of maintaining the nuclear triad, the *NPR* calls for the following updates:

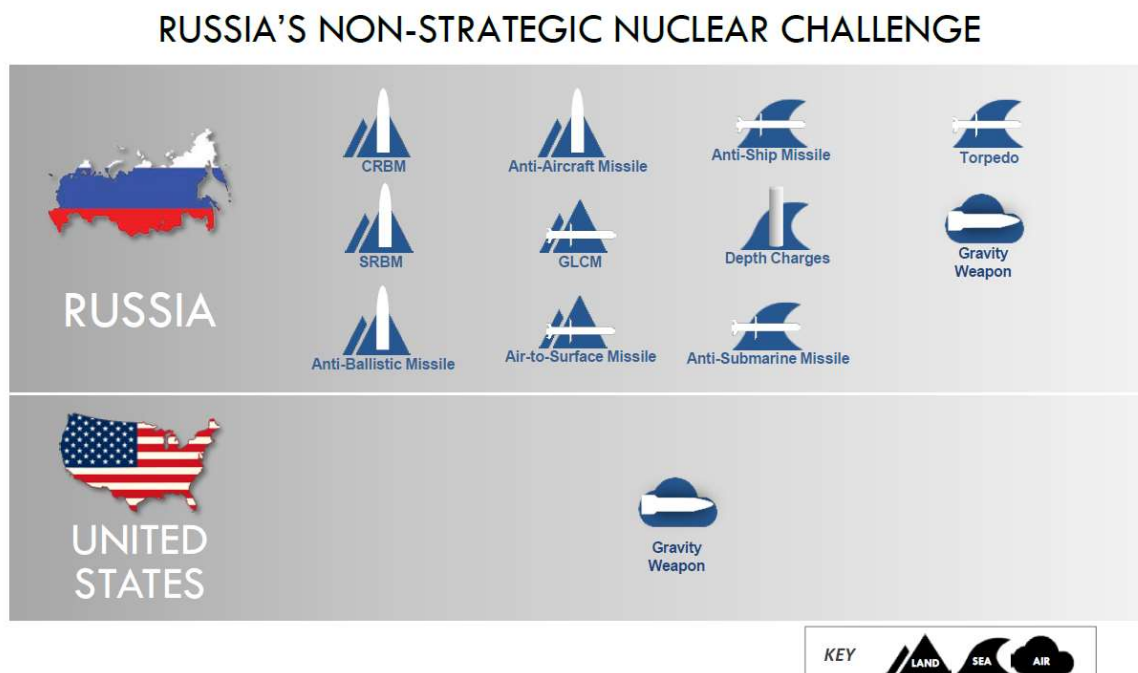
- 12 Columbia class submarines to replace the 14 Ohio class nuclear capable submarines.¹⁰⁷
- Modernize 450 ICBM facilities fielding 400 missiles.
- Develop a new nuclear bomber to replace the B52 and B-2.
- Maintaining a larger tactical nuclear stockpile.

However, the *NPR* does go beyond revitalizing America’s traditional nuclear capability and calls for several new systems and pieces of equipment. In order to provide the “flexibility” that DoD assumes the President will need in order to meet all adversaries, the *NPR* calls for increasing American non-strategic nuclear capabilities. This means that US will employ more lower yield warheads and develop the delivery systems to use them. There are two major initiatives planned for delivery systems. The first involves modifying existing submarine launched ballistic missiles, trident ICBMS, to carry lower yield weapons. The first of these weapons was built in February 2019, and it is thought that they carry a warhead of less than 10 kiloton, far bellow the standard 100

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, II

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, X

or 455 KT yield of its normal warheads.¹⁰⁸ User planners believe that using the SLBMs in this role will counter perceived “gaps” that adversaries may imagine in US regional deterrence. The gap they speak of is the quantitative advantage the Russian Federation has in tactical nuclear weapons, and the theory that the Russians might be tempted to use their stockpile in conflict on the assumption that the US lacks the capability to match low-yield warheads and would be unwilling to use the much larger warheads it has in service.



*Fig 2. How the Trump administration presents the gap in tactical delivery vehicles.*¹⁰⁹

The second program is to build new submarine-launched cruise missiles (SLCM) in direct contravention of the 2010 NPR which had called for the last SLCM to be phased out in 2011, which it was.¹¹⁰ The administration sees a new cruise missile as not just another tool to give them the “flexibility” in nuclear options that they seek. They also see a SLCM as a possible way to nudge the Russian Federation in compliance with the INF,

¹⁰⁸ Ankit Panda. “First New US Low-yield submarine launched ballistic missile” 14 March 2019. Available at <https://thediplomat.com/2019/03/first-new-us-low-yield-submarine-launched-ballistic-missile-warhead-produced/>

¹⁰⁹ 2018 NPR, Pg. 53.

¹¹⁰ Ibid, Pg. 55

which the US claims the Russians have been violating (and which Russian President Vladimir Putin admitted to for all intents and purposes in spring 2018)¹¹¹. As the INF does not cover sea-launched missiles, the US believes that this is a “treaty-compliant”¹¹² method to counter Russian nuclear advances and nudge them into a more amicable policy. Unlike the other initiatives for the nuclear forces, the administration sees the new SLCM as more than a deterrent; they feel that possessing these weapons will influence Russian behavior. The NPR explicitly references the deployment of Pershing II missiles to Europe as the catalyst for Soviet negotiation of the INF treaty in the first place.¹¹³ They clearly hope to replicate that state of affairs with the new SLCM, as well as providing “flexibility” and “diversity” in their responses. The Trump administration is signaling that it is exploring “tailored strategies” of deterrence for China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea, although the unclassified version of the *NPR* does not enumerate what those strategies involve aside from general flexibility.¹¹⁴

The Trump NPR characterized the 2017 Nuclear Weapons Ban Treaty as being “fueled by wholly unrealistic expectations of the elimination of nuclear arsenals without the prerequisite transformation of the international security environment.”¹¹⁵ This is not out of character for American policy, no president other than Regan has seriously entertained this possibility, and there is not much it can add. It is only useful to note that as a point of emphasis in that there is an absence of conciliatory language that would suggest that disarmament is even a worthy goal, let alone a policy the administration would consider.

Novelties of the Trump Strategy

Given that there has been so much made of the Trump administration’s departure from American political norms, we should take a moment to consider how much of a departure the Trump nuclear policy is from his predecessors. The NPR of

¹¹¹ “Russia’s Putin unveils ‘invincible’ nuclear weapons,” *BBC*, 1 March 2018, available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-43239331>

¹¹² 2018 *NPR*, Pg. 55

¹¹³ *Ibid*, Pg. 55

¹¹⁴ *Ibid*, Pg. 25

¹¹⁵ *Ibid*, Pg. 72

2018 differs from President Obama's NPR in both its philosophical outlook and policy prescriptions. Whereas the 2010 NPR was predicated on reducing the American reliance on nuclear weapons, the 2018 NPR does the opposite. The 2010 NPR saw a different context for the nuclear arsenal. According to it, there was no great power competition between Russia, China, and the US, but instead there existed "strategic stability."¹¹⁶ The relationship between the US and the Russian Federation, for example, had "evolved" and moved beyond the Cold War context into a relationship based on cooperation vis-a-vis nuclear issues. When it came to weapons reductions and non-proliferation issues, Russia was a valued partner. After all, the NPR was drafted in the same year that New START was signed. And while there was concern about the pace of Chinese military modernization, the Obama administration recognized that China was economically interdependent with the US¹¹⁷, and that their nuclear arsenal was far below the numbers and capabilities enjoyed by both the US and the Russian Federation. As the Obama NPR put it, "Russia remains America's only peer in the area of nuclear weapons capabilities."¹¹⁸ The number one nuclear threat to the United States was nuclear proliferation leading to a terrorist organization gaining control of a nuclear weapon. This was the first priority of the 2010 NPR and cooperation on non-proliferation issues was its central theme, along with reducing US dependence on nuclear arms.

The Obama administration ordered the retiring of the SLCMs (TLAM-N) because it saw it as being generally redundant given the options available, and they were committed to reducing nuclear stockpiles. However, they were sanguine about the amount of non-strategic nuclear warheads that the Russian Federation held at the time and remained aware that many of those weapons were deployed near NATO countries.¹¹⁹ The administration felt that a combination of nuclear capable aircraft that were forward deployable combined with "U.S. ICBMs and SLBMs are [all] capable of striking any potential adversary,"¹²⁰ provided enough of a deterrent effect for itself and its allies. Although this was part of the general reduction of the emphasis of nuclear

¹¹⁶ 2010 *NPR*, Pg. iv.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid*, Pg. v.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid*, Pg. iv

¹¹⁹ *Ibid*, Pg. 27.

¹²⁰ *Ibid*

weapons in US deterrence strategy, the administration also felt that the pre-existing overlapping capabilities they already had were adequate to the task of deterrence.

The Trump nuclear strategy is fundamentally opposed to the philosophy of its predecessor. Eschewing Obama's "strategic stability" in favor of renewed competition, the Trump policy puts renewed emphasis on American nuclear capabilities. The uncertainty with which the Trump administration views both its own position and its potential rivals undergirds its strategy. While the Obama administration strove toward a world without nuclear weapons, the Trump presidency holds to the line that fundamental changes would have to occur in the international system before it would be wise to make moves toward reducing American nuclear capacity. The result is the Trump strategy seems to be much more prepared, if not eager, to leverage its nuclear arsenal as a tool. It is telling that the *NPR itself* is a tool for nuclear deterrence, in that it demonstrates that the administration is not just planning on deterring a nuclear war, but fighting one as well.¹²¹ That signals that the administration has the will to use the weapons if necessary, and the message is aimed at allies and adversaries alike. Trump's review, unlike his predecessor, contains less language concerning cooperation, and devotes a large amount of space to its tailored strategies for its rivals. In this regard, the *NPR* is signaling the US is actively considering how it will employ its nuclear weapons against its adversaries. This is not to say that the Trump strategy completely eschews non-proliferation; on the contrary it confirms American commitment to the NPT¹²². The difference is in emphasis and tone. While the Obama administration also reserved the right to use nuclear weapons in extreme circumstances, and would not disavow the possibility of "first use," it did not give the impression of being so readily prepared to do so.

Implications

What does this mean? Overall the Trump nuclear policy signals a return to reliance of nuclear weapons for deterrence as well as willingness to explore possible

¹²¹ Seyom Brown, "The Trump Administration's Nuclear Posture Review: in Historical Perspective," *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament*, 01 Aug 2018, Vol 1, No2, Pg. 279

¹²² 2018 *NPR*, Pg 70.

scenarios for their use. The primary role of deterrence and the importance of the nuclear triad in service of that mission has not changed significantly. What is different is tone; while one could argue that the elimination of nuclear weapons was never in the cards for the Obama administration, it was committed to lowering available stockpiles. After all, it signed NEW START and unilaterally cut over 500 weapons from its stockpile without replacement.¹²³ The Trump administration on the other hand does not seem all that concerned about further weapons reductions, although it does hold out for the possibility for further treaties¹²⁴. They are very concerned about involving China in any further treaties, despite the reality that China is estimated to have an arsenal ten times smaller than either the US or Russia:

Status of World Nuclear Forces 2019*					
Country	Deployed Strategic	Deployed Nonstrategic	Reserve/ Nondeployed	Military Stockpile^a	Total Inventory^b
Russia	1,600 ^c	0 ^d	2,730 ^e	4,330	6,500 ^f
United States	1,600 ^g	150 ^h	2,050 ⁱ	3,800 ^j	6,185 ^k
France	280 ^l	n.a.	20 ^l	300	300
China	0 ^m	?	290	290	290 ^m
United Kingdom	120 ⁿ	n.a.	95	215	215 ⁿ
Israel	0	n.a.	80	80	80 ^o
Pakistan	0	n.a.	140-150	140-150	140-150 ^p
India	0	n.a.	130-140	130-140	130-140 ^q
North Korea	0	n.a.	?	20-30	20-30 ^r
Total:^s	~3,600	~150	~5,555	~9,330	~13,890

Fig 3. Status of World Nuclear Forces according to FAS ¹²⁵

What has changed is the emphasis that US strategy places on the employment of non-strategic nuclear weapons. Having been convinced that the Russian Federation has a doctrine of “escalate to deescalate,” the Trump administration feels that the asymmetry in tactical weapons between Russia and the US constitutes a “gap.” The United States currently has roughly 500 tactical nuclear weapons 150 of which are

¹²³ Kristensen, Hans M, “Obama Administration announces Unilateral Nuclear Weapons Cuts,” *Federation of American Scientists*, 11 January 2017, available at <https://fas.org/blogs/security/2017/01/obama-cuts/>

¹²⁴ 2018 NPR, Pg. XVII

¹²⁵ Hans M Kristensen and Matt Corda, “Status of World Nuclear Forces,” *Federation of American Scientists*, May 2019, available at <https://fas.org/issues/nuclear-weapons/status-world-nuclear-forces/>

deployed in Europe.¹²⁶ Russia is estimated to have just over 1,800 non-strategic weapons¹²⁷ in its arsenal. Russia has also simulated the use of nuclear weapons against NATO forces in its *Zapad* training exercises. Based primarily on these two facts, US planners believe that Russians have indeed identified a gap, an advantage they hold that can be exploited. It is thought that the Russian Federation believes it can use a tactical nuclear weapon in a conventional war and not fear reprisal because the US would not have the capability to respond in kind with tactical nuclear weapons, and would not be willing to escalate to using its higher-yield weapons, which average between 100 and 435 kilotons in yield.

The issue with “escalate to deescalate” is that it is not clear that it exists as a real doctrine. The term does not appear in any Russian strategy documents, nor does an equivalent strategy or tactic that amounts to it. While it is possible to reason such a strategy out of Russian actions and planning, having it be officially doctrine is another matter. This is a conceptual problem in nuclear weapons and deterrence. A likely example of a case where the Russian federation would use tactical nuclear weapons would be to hedge against NATO conventional capability. If they lost a conventional land battle and NATO armored brigades were storming towards Moscow, it is likely they would use a tactical nuclear weapon against an invader. This is known because the Russian Federation announces their intention to do so, retaining the right to first use in the case of a large-scale conventional war.¹²⁸ This has been known since Russia disavowed no first use in 1993. The United States does not declare “no first use” for the same reason. However, such a policy is not escalate to deescalate; that implies the use of weapons in an offensive situation. That is to say that escalate to deescalate doctrine would allow Russian forces could invade another country, use a tactical weapon to stymie international response, and get away with it. In Russian doctrine there is no published policy that indicates they plan to use non-strategic weapons in this fashion.

¹²⁶ Hans M Kristensen and Robert S. Norris, “United States Nuclear Forces 2018,” *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, 05 March 2018, Vol 74, No. 2, available at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/00963402.2018.1438219?needAccess=true>. Pg. 129.

¹²⁷ Hans M Kristensen and Matt Corda, „Russia Nuclear Forces 2019,” *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, 04 March 2019, Vol 75, No 2, available at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/00963402.2019.1580891?needAccess=true>. Pg. 80.

¹²⁸ Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation, 25 December 2014, available at <https://rusemb.org.uk/press/2029>

Moreover, when it comes to deterrence, a policy only works if one tells their adversary. If one does not know the red line, one will be unaware that they crossed it. In fairness, such a policy, if it exists, would likely not be part of a deterrence policy.

A practical issue with such a policy is that even though one is using low-yield weapons, the calculus of nuclear escalation does not disappear. Even though tactical nuclear weapons are orders of magnitude less destructive than strategic weapons it doesn't mean that there is not a taboo on using them¹²⁹. Nuclear weapons are uniquely destructive, and their radiological effects mean they are not constrained by space or time,¹³⁰ even a low yield weapon can continue to kill long after conflict is over. The fact that no nation has ever used them (excepting Hiroshima and Nagasaki which could be considered non-strategic yield weapons today) should be seen as a data point. If one were to employ them in a conventional war, it could still amount to crossing a moral Rubicon and lead to escalation. One's internal calculus might tell them that they could get away with using a low-yield weapon, but one would not want to bet the existence of their nation on their adversary thinking the same way. Such a policy is also awkward due to the reality that the US has roughly 500 tactical weapons, 150 of them already in Europe. What kind of gap does the Russian Federation imagine exists? The US still retains tactical nuclear weapons, and there's little to indicate that they would hesitate to use them in conflict where the Russians used them first.

The biggest danger caused by the renewed emphasis on tactical nuclear weapons is the possibility of miscalculation. The previous administration had wanted to "thicken" the line between nuclear and conventional confrontations in order to make it impassable.¹³¹ The issue with non-strategic weapons, especially those discussed by the Trump administration, is that it makes for a confused situation. One of the issues with non-strategic weapons is that there is no way an adversary would know the payload of a weapon being launched until after detonation. In a world with advanced radar and command and control systems that can detect missiles moving towards a nation and

¹²⁹ Sethi, Manpreet, "US Nuclear Posture Review 2018: Unwisely Re-opening 'Settled' Nuclear Issues," *India Quarterly*, Vol 74, Iss. 3. 2018. Pg. 332

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Brown, Pg. 277.

launch their own counterstrikes before such a missile makes landfall, this is a massive liability. Trump officials have put emphasis on developing and building variable yield weapons, called “dial-a-yield,” and modifying SLBMs for lower yield warheads, and at the same time implied that such weapons raise the nuclear threshold.¹³² There is no reason to think this is true, and it is hard to imagine a logic that would support such an assertion. The only assumption that really makes sense to support it is that by having such weapons in the first place, all other nations would deter from using their weapons.¹³³ Combined with the assumption that US would not engage in first use, even though this is not policy, this makes for a strategy that essentially wants to match other nations in capability in order to offer credible responses. However, this logic goes out the window if anyone ever uses a tactical weapon; the inherent dangers of such weapons and their delivery systems would become quickly apparent. Then Defense Secretary Mattis undercut the logic of a tactical/strategic distinction in February 2018 when he said that he doesn’t believe that, “there is any such thing as a tactical nuclear weapon. Any nuclear weapon used any time is a strategic game changer.”¹³⁴ This is a logic that appears to be more reliable than risking a full nuclear exchange by miscalculation and the usage of tactical nuclear weapons.

The importance of discussing escalate to deescalate and the Trump deterrence strategy is to investigate the strategic thinking taking place. The language used, especially in the *NPR* when discussing a “Tailored Strategy for Russia,” emphasizes flexibility. The administration’s general approach to nuclear strategy is similar to its conventional strategy; maintain overmatch. The goal of the nuclear strategy is to obtain more capabilities in order to give the administration more options. Yet, how the administration plans to employ these capabilities is left unsaid. For example, the *NPR* states that, “the U.S. deterrent tailored to Russia, therefore, will be capable of holding at risk, under all conditions, what Russia’s leadership most values.”¹³⁵ What does the US believe are things that the Russian leadership values, and how would obtaining more

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Congressional Research Service, *Non-Strategic Nuclear Weapons*, 17 January 2019. Pg. 10.

¹³⁵ 2018 *NPR*, Pg. 30.

delivery systems for tactical nuclear weapons helps hold these things under risk? Granted, the actual operational plans and specific targets are likely classified, however the deterrence only works if one's adversary knows what one's trip wires for response are, and how one would plan to respond. The Trump nuclear policy simply calls for more delivery vehicles for non-strategic weapons in service of flexibility and "tailored" responses. Yet even the tailored strategies are vague, and do not represent a departure from previous strategies. It is worth noting the value that the administration puts on its own perceived gap in capability. This chart in particular stands out and is meant to underscore how the US has fallen behind it's adversaries.

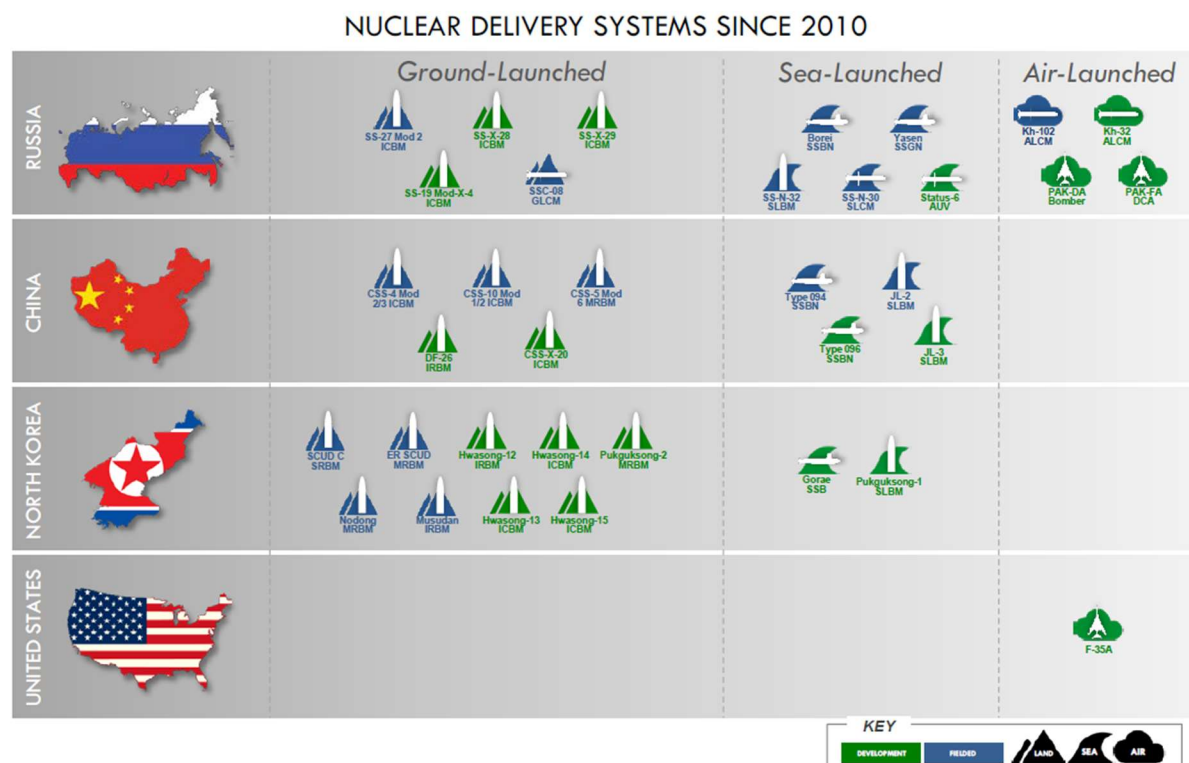


Fig 04. How the trump administration views delivery systems development NPR¹³⁶

The Trump administration believes that this asymmetry in delivery systems represents a gap that the Russian Federation has built a doctrine around. The problem is that Trump administration outputs fail to explain how these capabilities actually lead to a logic where one could be secure in using non-strategic nuclear weapons and avoid

¹³⁶ 2018 NPR, Pg.8.

reprisal. It is simply asserted as a fact, yet there is no rationale that is explained as to how this would work in a world where one's adversaries also possess not only tactical nuclear weapons, but strategic ones as well. Escalation is always a risk, and there are no previous examples demonstrating that one can keep a nuclear exchange contained to warheads of any yield. Why would one ever 'bet the farm' on such a gamble? This is not explored. However, the logic of simply having a capability automatically conferring some kind of advantage is mirrored in the Trump strategy. To his administration, more capability means more power. How such power serves a strategy or could be leveraged is unexplored. Much like the idea of "overmatch" for the DoD at large, in the Trump nuclear strategy, power, in the form of weapons, is its own end.

Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty

A relevant addition to the US nuclear strategy as published has been Trump's position on the Intermediate Nuclear Forces treaty (INF). The treaty, which had entered into force on 1 June 1988 had been an achievement of arms control in that it banned an entire class of weapons for the US and Russia, as well as implemented one of the most comprehensive verification and inspection regimes to date.¹³⁷ In Oct 2018, the President signaled his intention to pull the United States out of the treaty which limited the development and deployment of land-based missiles with ranges between 500 – 5,000 km. The President asserted that the Russian Federation had been in violation of the treaty and that it was effectively void. He reasoned that if Russia was developing treaty non-compliant missiles, then it was in the US interest to follow suit. "We're not going to let them violate a nuclear agreement and go out and do weapons and we're not allowed to."¹³⁸ It is not an unfair point to make. The US claims that the 9M729 missile developed by the Russian Federation is not treaty compliant, and the Director of National Intelligence Dan Coates made the case in November 2018. The US contention is that the Russian Federation tested the missile from a fixed ground launcher at ranges beyond 500km and a mobile launcher at ranges below 500km, and by doing so skirted

¹³⁷ "The Demise of the INF Treaty," *Strategic Comments*, Vol 24, No 9, 11 December 2018.

¹³⁸ Kingston Reif, "Trump to Withdraw US From INF Treaty" *Arms Control Association*, November 2018, available at <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2018-11/news/trump-withdraw-us-inf-treaty>

the wording of the treaty in order to break it.¹³⁹ There is some ambiguity in the allegation, as the treaty allows certain types of testing, as long as the missile is intended for air or sea launched use. Regardless, alleged Russian violations are the primary rationale offered by both the President and administration officials for why the US decided to withdraw. The second issue is that the treaty only covered the United States and Russia, while other nations were free to develop such missiles as they saw fit. This was not a new problem, and Vladimir Putin had registered his dissatisfaction with the treaty for this very reason.¹⁴⁰ President Trump brought this issue to the fore when he declared that, “unless Russia comes to us and China comes to us, and they all come to us and say, ‘Let’s get really smart, and about it, and let’s none of us develop those weapons,” that the US would have to have further develop its own arsenal.¹⁴¹ Bringing China in to the mix is nothing new; Trump’s National Security Advisor John Bolton has been arguing for years that the capabilities that China has developed while not being bound by the treaty represent a threat to the US.¹⁴² Even though the President has clearly put the onus for failure of the treaty on the Russian Federation, and held out hope for saving the treaty if Russia satisfies US demands,¹⁴³ the issue of limited membership represents an impasse that will likely not be resolved. Previous American and Russian administrations made little effort to bring other states into the treaty and there has been little interest in joining. If the Trump administration still feels that Chinese weapons development represents a threat in August of this year, the US will follow through on its intention to pull out. The administration feels that a status quo where other nations can possibly gain an advantage over the US in any area is unacceptable. President Trump followed through on his threat to remove the United States on 1 February 2019, when he announced the US was formally withdrawing from the treaty. In

¹³⁹ Dan Coates, “Russia’s INF Treaty Violation,” *Office of the Director of National Intelligence*, 30 November 2018. <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/newsroom/speeches-interviews/item/1923-director-of-national-intelligence-daniel-coats-on-russia-s-inf-treaty-violation>

¹⁴⁰ “The Demise of the INF Treaty.”

¹⁴¹ Reif.

¹⁴² See John R. Bolton and Paula A. Desutter, “A Cold War Missile Treaty That’s Doing Us Harm,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 15 August 2011.

¹⁴³ “Statement from the President Regarding the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty,” *The White House*, 01 February 2019, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-president-regarding-intermediate-range-nuclear-forces-inf-treaty/>

his statement, Trump declared that “For too long, we have been held back by self-imposed limits while foreign competitors grow and they advance more than we have over the years,”¹⁴⁴ Clearly, the number one concern is that the US could fall into some kind of disadvantage, although it is not clear what kind of disadvantage that would be.

Trump Strategy in Toto

Looking at the Trump nuclear strategy, nested within the greater national security strategy for the U.S., we can develop a picture how the Trump administration sees the world and what actions it intends to take. It is very clear that the Trump administration sees the world as multipolar. The salient feature of his worldview is the “return of great power competition.” While security threats such as terrorism still exists, nothing represents quite the existential threat that a competition between nations does. In this newly competitive world, US power has been allowed to atrophy. In order to protect the security of the United States, the Trump administration has identified stability and the preservation of US power, which it often views as synonymous, as being the key interests of the United States. Under the rubric of “principled realism,” the Trump administration views championing democracy and human rights as luxuries, and it will only engage in their promotion when it serves the US interest. The primary goal for the Trump administration is to expand American military power in order to ensure its own security. American economic power is meant to fuel American military innovation and growth. Allies are valuable in so far as they serve immediate American interests. In the current case, that appears to be marshalling their own strength to give the US more power through proxy.

The type of power game that Trump administration is engaging in can be seen through their nuclear policy, which is a microcosm of their general security strategy. The world is multipolar and America’s primary competitors are China and Russia, while “rogues” such as Iran and North Korea threaten stability. In the realm of nuclear arms, competition is again the name of the game. While China is regarded as an up and coming threat, the real competitor in the nuclear realm is the Russian Federation. The

¹⁴⁴ David E. Sanger and William J. Broad, “U.S. Suspends Nuclear Arms Control Treaty With Russia,” *The New York Times*, 01 February 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/01/us/politics/trump-inf-nuclear-treaty.html>

fear that the administration has of a Russian “escalate to deescalate” policy is the prime mover in a strategy that calls for a change in how the US approaches non-strategic nuclear weapons. The Trump administration wants to meet the Russian challenge through enhanced capability that it believes will give it more flexibility. The flexibility that the US seeks is based purely on the stockpiling of weapons and delivery systems, and very little attention is given to whether or not the systems already in place constitute a credible deterrent already. Much like the conventional military strategy’s policy of maintaining overmatch, the nuclear policy seems to be based merely on counting weapons and delivery vehicles as opposed to an assessment of current capabilities. Again, this appears to be a case of power for its own end.

The most common theme of the different elements of the various strategies and policies concerning national security, is a preoccupation with power. On a grand strategy level, this power is both economic and military. However, as has been demonstrated in the *NSS*, the Trump administration tends to view its economic clout as all stick and no carrot. The most important element of power is military power. The Trump administration constantly repeats a refrain lamenting the loss of American power, wherein the remedy is greater military spending. This spending and attending expansion of capabilities is supposed to bring more “flexibility” for the president. However, it is unclear how he intends to wield that power, and in which situations he feels that force would be legitimate. The main goal is to simply accumulate more power for its own sake. The means are ends.

Discussion: Does the Shoe Fit?

Placing Trump’s security policy within Mearsheimer’s paradigm allows us to see a lot of immediate overlap. Mearsheimer posits an anarchic international system where states are in competition with one another. This competition is graded by weighing relative military power and economic strength as the means to more military power. A nation’s primary goal in the international competition is survival, and to that end it will seek to maximize its own power. Because of the stakes of the game, states can never be sure of another’s intentions. This means that states can only completely rely on themselves, although they will balance opponents to their advantage. Non-security

goals may still exist, but they cannot interfere with the balance of power logic. This summary sounds a lot like the Trump worldview, as actualized through its security and nuclear policies.

The Trump administration's pseudo-isolationist tendencies can be seen as a reflection of a country thinking in offensive realist terms. Trump wants "America First" because he does not trust the intentions of any other country and feels that it is up to the United States alone to secure its own survival. The only way to completely ensure one's nation is safe is to become a hegemon. It is clear in the rhetoric used to describe America's place in world; America has declined while all the other nations of the world have taken advantage of her. Possible regional hegemons are seen as competitors on the world stage, while traditional allies are constantly lambasted for their buck passing behavior.

The primary means of the United States appears to be found in restoring a level of economic dominance, while at the same time possibly stymieing the advance of China, and using the proceeds of that dominance in order to strengthen US military power. Trump's economic warfare with China can fall broadly within the offensive realistic school of thought, but a tactical mistake in Mearsheimer's eyes. If the United States wants to check the rise of China, the logical strategy, short of war, is containment.¹⁴⁵ However, if China has not yet made a move for hegemony, it is because it lacks the military strength to do so. The means to gain that strength is through economic growth. If one really fears the "rise" of China, then one fears China channeling its wealth into military power and wielding that power in world politics. A preventive war is almost certainly out of the question, and it's hard to rollback a regime whose actual influence and allies are as of yet negligible. This leaves slowing China's economic rise as a possible strategy. Mearsheimer argues that this is not viable for the US as both their economies are so intricately linked that it would be impossible for the US to hurt China's economy without hurting its own. It would amount to cutting off one's nose to spite their face. However, Donald Trump has the luxury of an economic outlook wherein he believes that he can engage in economic warfare to the benefit of the United

¹⁴⁵ Mearsheimer, Pg. 385.

States¹⁴⁶. With that kind of thinking on board, the economic negging taking place with China is capable not just of stymieing Chinese growth, but also increasing American power at the same time.

In conjunction with America becoming economically stronger, the Trump administration wants to achieve what it calls “Peace through Strength.” While the administration does not fear the military might of either the Russian Federation or PRC at the current moment, it does fear an incremental chipping away of American dominance until a new status quo which is no longer in their favor emerges.¹⁴⁷ There is a clear implication that despite all the rhetoric about the atrophy of US power, the administration still believes that the United States is in a dominant position and is in control of its own fate. Russia and China are reasserting themselves to be sure, but they have not fully risen. The Trump administration clearly believes that more confident and capable adversaries are dangerous for their interests, and that maintaining American dominance is a means to keeping the peace. They want to be in a position of strength in order to decrease both their deterrence capability and negotiating power.¹⁴⁸ On the one hand, it’s difficult to imagine a country that does not want to be a position of strength. On the other hand, the Trump administration does not seem to elucidate clear interests outside of being strong. While it names rogue nations as the current “scourge” of the world, and name drops Islamic terrorism as a threat, the *NSS* is generally vague about what kind of leverage increased US power will give the administration. The United States has been dominant for decades, yet its unsurpassed military strength has not ended the threat from rogue nations or terrorism. The policy documents of the administration place a premium on creating options and flexibility through greater strength, but are not clear on how such strength will be exercised. Military strength is usually a way to achieve interests, but with the Trump administration military strength is the interest. Under offensive realism, the growth of raw military power is the definition of

¹⁴⁶ Donald Trump (realDonaldTrump), “When a country (USA) is losing many billions of dollars on trade with virtually every country it does business with, trade wars are good, and easy to win. Example, when we are down \$100 billion with a certain country and they get cute, don’t trade anymore-we win big. It’s easy!,” 2:50 a.m., 02 March 2018, Tweet, available at <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/969525362580484098>.

¹⁴⁷ *NSS*, Pg. 28.

¹⁴⁸ *NSS*, Pg. 26.

“internal balancing.” Internal balancing is clearly the top strategy for the Trump White House to deter aggression.

This fits clearly within Mearsheimer’s paradigm. The goal is to maximize one’s own power, especially land power, in order to gain regional hegemony. The United States already clearly possess this already. It’s strategy of peace through strength emphasizes restoring a perceived loss in power due to the self-imposed bloodletting of the past two decades. This power above all needs to be sufficient to ensure US dominance in its own region. When discussing regional strategies, the United States sees instability and poor governance as being the only indigenous threats to its interests in the Western Hemisphere. Instability however, can pose a substantial threat to American interests as it gives its competitors “operating space” ¹⁴⁹ that enables them to make inroads into the region. Specifically, the Trump administration fears that the Cuba and Venezuela are offering themselves to Chinese and Russian spheres of influence ¹⁵⁰. While such influence does not pose an existential threat to the US, it is exactly the kind of disruption that potential hegemons from other regions seek to create in order to deflect American attention from their own areas. At the same time, Trump’s strategy recognizes security interests in Asia and Europe that are in opposition to Russia and China, and it seeks to balance them within their own regions through alliances. The word “partnership” occurs repeatedly in the NSS, and despite its criticism of NATO, the US clearly wants to leverage allies in order to enhance its own power abroad.

The Trump nuclear strategy, again a microcosm of its greater security strategy, also appears to fit neatly into offensive realism. The current US strategy is to keep nuclear weapons as the foundation of US deterrence, update and improve the infrastructure of the arsenal, and to develop new delivery systems and warheads for non-strategic nuclear weapons. The US seeks to gain flexibility and the ability to tailor its responses to specific rivals by maintaining a variety of weapons and delivery systems. Power is found in having a large number of weapons in one’s arsenal, not necessarily the specifics of how the power one has is employed. The US feels that a

¹⁴⁹ NSS, Pg. 51.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

previously ignored asymmetry in tactical weapon systems vis-a-vis Russia constitutes a gap in US response credibility that needs to be corrected. The way it fits in offensive realism is that there is competition taking place despite vast array of capability already on the table. Despite the arms reductions of the past 40 years, the United states still possess a stockpile of over 4,000¹⁵¹ warheads, more than enough to inflict intolerable damage on the Russia Federation in an all-out nuclear war. It also still has 500 tactical weapons in its inventory, yet it perceives a world where the asymmetry in numbers and types of delivery systems creates a vulnerability in the minds of their adversaries. Why their current stockpile suddenly does not possess that capability to respond, even if “escalate to deescalate” is a fact, is not considered. The administration’s plan, in this regard, to rearm SLBMs with lower yield warheads and remake SLCMs, cuts across deterrence logic and is not backed up by any rationale other than attempting to match capability. It is unnecessary on it’s face. Yet, under offensive realism, nations should engage in nuclear competition, at least on low level, to ensure that they are researching new technologies and exercising their fielding programs in the case that sudden innovation in technology completely changes the game. Moreover, the United States can still engage in arms reduction treaties with its adversaries, as long as it keeps developing new technologies. Pulling out of the INF fits clearly in this view of competition as well. If other nations are either cheating or not bound, that means they are actively working on gaining a potential game-changing advantage. This is unacceptable to the current administration on it’s face, and a sober analysis of whether producing such weapons for the American nuclear would currently benefit the US is not needed.

Taken as a whole, the Trump administration’s worldview and security policies, to include its nuclear policy, fits nicely inside Mearsheimer’s paradigm. Based upon this conclusion, it should be possible to predict future actions of the administration. Overall, the US will attempt to increase its own power through a combination of external and internal balancing. First, this will mean that the United States will continue to prioritize its military strength and freedom of action. This will mean more military spending, weapons

¹⁵¹ Hans M Kristensen and Robert S. Norris.

production, and research and development. Second, it will mean the US will try to increase its power internationally, which will mean that the Trump administration will continue to angle for treaties and allies that that garner obvious advantages to the United States. Whether they can secure such instruments is another matter. If they feel that an agreement does not benefit the US more than its competitors, they will attempt to move away from it. This could include arms reduction treaties, instruments of international law, and economic agreements. At the same time, the administration has expressed a desire to continue nuclear arms reduction treaties, but they must be inclusive of China as well as the Russian Federation, something that has yet to happen. Allies will continue to be pressed to expand their military capacity in areas where the US perceives rivals, and the US will likely search for new partners willing to spend on defense. Third, the US will likely engage in behavior meant to stymie its rivals, the Russian Federation and China, or put breaks on their growth. This is the most difficult to execute as the current administration does not want a war with either and must tread lightly to avoid exacerbating tensions. If the US sees an opportunity to bleed a rival, then it will likely do so. This could take the form of more support for Ukraine in Donbass or possibly engaging with Chinese separatists. However, such measures could constitute crossing “red lines” for these nations and care will have to be taken. More likely in China’s case will be that the US will try to limit their economic growth without hurting their own economy. As this is almost impossible, such measures will likely be very limited and not grow beyond anything the president has already done. The bottom line will be; anything that increases US power will be on the table. Anything that limits American freedom of action will be attacked. One must remember however, that despite the considerable power of the Presidency, the Commander in Chief is not omnipotent. He will likely face opposition in his bureaucracy and the other branches of government. He will likely not accomplish all he wants to at home, let alone abroad. However, it is almost certain that he will Tweet about it.

Counter Theories

Are there other theories that can accurately describe the Trump administration? We can consider a few to determine whether or not they fit. Liberalism, as a theory of

international relations, is a broad concept and can encapsulate many different subsets such as neoliberalism and commercial liberalism. Broadly, liberalism supports the idea that international cooperation is a route to peace. It broadly rejects the power dynamic that realism explains in favor of international institutions that establish norms in the international sphere. Trump's worldview alone, multipolar great power politics, is enough to dismiss liberalism, but his policies do not lend themselves to the theory either. Trump seeks a restructuring of international institutions to reinforce American power, and generally holds them in contempt. He seeks to "restore" what he perceives to be a weakened America, and the tools he wants to use are both economic and military. Power is his currency, and he does not want to engage in any cooperation that he believes will limit American freedom of Action. "America First" put into practice means leveraging American elements of power as blunt instruments to bend other nations, including long standing allies, to his will. Clearly, he is not a liberal.

It is clear that Trump's security policy is clearly within the realist camp. The emphasis on national power, as embodied in the nation's armed forces, and international competition clearly lend themselves to realism. His administration has repeatedly signaled that the US is in a competitive multipolar world, and that great power competition is the name of the game. International institutions are themselves battlegrounds where the US fights for influence, not forums for agreement and cooperation. Yet there are other forms of realism and rubrics that fall within realism that offer explanations. I will consider a couple.

The main credible counter theory to explain Trump could be Waltz's structural or "defensive" realism. The Theory is much like Mearsheimer's offensive realism, indeed Mearsheimer was building directly off of Waltz's realism when he drafted his theory of realism. Thus, both share many of the same axioms: the international system is anarchic, power is the currency of the realm, and states strive to ensure their own independence. What differentiates Walz from Mearsheimer is that defensive realism posits that states will balance one another and moderate their policies in order to respond to changes in the system¹⁵², while offensive realism maintains that states seek

¹⁵² Kenneth N Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, Illinois: Waveland Press Inc., 1979, Pg. 126.

hegemony in order to keep their security. Thus, there is much more drive for cooperation within defensive realism, although cooperation still exists under offensive realism. What sets the two theories apart, and where defensive realism fails to account for the actions of the Trump administration is in their view of power. Waltz is very clear about power being a “means and not an end”¹⁵³ unto itself. States seek to maintain their position in the international system and not necessarily advance¹⁵⁴ as long as they feel secure, a position that Mearsheimer calls a “status quo bias.”¹⁵⁵ Mearsheimer essentially makes power and security synonymous, in that a state can only be truly secure if it becomes a hegemon in a system.¹⁵⁶ This appears to jibe more with the Trump administration’s policies, which thus far pay lip service to balancing and coalition forming in order to deal with it’s rivals, but has not engaged in any substantial efforts to contain China or Russia with international partners. “America First,” and the policies that accompany it, fit more within Mearsheimer’s theory that posits power maximization as the end goal of a state. Waltz could still end up being more correct in the end, after all the theories are very similar and the differences are in the details. However, for Waltz’s defensive realism to fit better, the Trump administration would have to show both in word and deed that it does not believe that it can “go it alone” and be much more open to burden sharing. Despite the rhetoric concerning the monetary contributions of NATO allies, the massive increases in defense spending show that Trump is at least somewhat serious when he considers abandoning the alliance. Power still appears to be an end, not a means.

In some of the analysis that other scholars have done in comparing offensive and defensive neorealism, nuclear weapons stand out as an issue that differentiates the two. Under defensive realism, nuclear can create absolute security for a nation, based on the pure destructive power they bring to the table and the unsuitability of their use as weapons of war¹⁵⁷ Waltz would say that states have achieved absolute security by

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Mearsheimer, Pg. 20.

¹⁵⁶ Mearsheimer, Pg. 21.

¹⁵⁷ Zanny Krieger and Ariel Ilan Roth, “Nuclear Weapons in Neo-Realist Theory,” *International Studies Review*, Vol 9, No. 3, Autumn 2007. Pg. 374.

having nuclear arms, and the need to even compete in the nuclear realm is defunct, as a new generation weapons does not render an older generation obsolete.¹⁵⁸ This means that once one has achieved a minimum level of deterrence, one can stop playing the game, as the People's Republic of China appears to have done. It also means that conventional war is a lot less likely between nuclear powers as the risks are high. Mearsheimer would agree with that, as empirical evidence shows that nuclear powers do not directly fight each other in general.¹⁵⁹ Where offensive realism differs is that a power still has every incentive to play the game due to the lure that hegemonic power presents.¹⁶⁰ If one can make a technological breakthrough that can nullify an enemy second strike and protect one's own homeland completely, the one would have "won" the game. It makes sense to continue competing under offensive realism because one can never know if a new technology will fundamentally alter the entire nuclear landscape.

There is also a simple explanation that already falls within realist international relations paradigm: the Thucydides Trap. This refers to how the historian-general Thucydides explained the roots of the Peloponnesian war: "It was the rise of Athens and the fear this instilled in Sparta which made war inevitable."¹⁶¹ It was, essentially, the birth of international relations analysis and his observations fit neatly into realist paradigms, in that they emphasized power and warfare. In the current context, the Thucydides Trap is often used to refer to American apprehensiveness in the face of a rising China, or to a lesser extent a resurgent Russia. This example has become more relevant with both the increasing American anxiety over China, and the rhetoric and actions of President Trump. Graham Allison has written extensively on the problem posed by the Thucydides Trap and has explained the problem as one of severe structural stress that arises when a rising power threatens to usurp a ruling power.¹⁶² In such a situation, smaller conflicts and flashpoints can spiral out of control into a greater

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Mearsheimer, Pg. 131.

¹⁶⁰ Mearsheimer, Pg. 128.

¹⁶¹ Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, London: Penguin Books, 1954.

¹⁶² Allison, Graham, "Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides' Trap?" New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018. Pg 29

war due to fear and miscalculation. The fear runs between both parties, and explained by “rising power syndrome” where a nation in ascendance becomes more aware of itself, it’s power and it’s interests and feels more entitled to respect and position, while the “ruling power syndrome” is much the same, but is also characterized by a fear of decline and insecurity.¹⁶³ This certainly sounds a lot like the dynamic between the PRC and the Trump administration, who views it’s nation as having fallen behind China and sees the US as weakened. The Trap gives a useful lesson in the dangers of fear and paranoia, and also provides a hauntingly plausible scenario in which an American administration bent on reversing economic trends with China creates a cascade of miscalculations that turn a trade dispute into a hot war.¹⁶⁴

The Thucydides Trap, while a credible explanation of the China-USA relationship in the Trump era, does not account for the Trump policy as a whole, and certainly not the nuclear policy. The Thucydides trap, while apt at explaining American paranoia and angst about the rise of China, does not explain why the Trump administration is antagonistic towards the institutions that form a world order which is supportive of American dominance. The dismissiveness with which the Trump administration treats its allies in NATO and institutions that support American prerogatives like the World Trade Organization, is not something that the fear of Chinese power can begin to explain. More to the point of this paper, the Thucydides Trap cannot account for the anxiety of the Trump administration feels about its nuclear program, and its decisions to reinvest in new delivery platforms when it already has a more than capable deterrent option.

Conclusion

It is all but impossible to make a definitive conclusion on what drives the Trump administrations nuclear policy. Given the chaotic nature of the administration and difficulty in verifying information leaked from the inside the white house, it is very difficult to have a clear motive based on interviews and speeches alone. The best way to discern what is going on is to observe the actions the Trump administration takes and consider which model fits them best. Thus far, we can see that the Trump administration

¹⁶³ Allison, Pg 43.

¹⁶⁴ Allison, Pg. 181.

is singularly focused on complete autonomy for the United States, which translates more accurately into freedom of action for the United States in all areas. In order to achieve this freedom that Trump imagines that the US requires, the administration wants to revise the current international system so that other nations are beholden to the America without any kind of reciprocal commitments. Trump believes that this kind of revision is possible through tough talk backed by economic and military strength. The economy is about more than merely providing for the welfare of the American people, it's about being able to leverage American economic strength in order to bend other nations to America's will.

Moreover, despite the administration's stated distaste for waging war, it clearly sees military dominance as the key to achieving its goals. Trump administration's expansion of spending and weapons programs indicates that it is willing to enter into an arms race to achieve American dominance. There is not enough public information regarding how the defense spending and weapons increases factor into a grand strategy, aside from providing "options" and "flexibility". It is not clear what systems are being tailored to which threats. In fairness, it is possible that such analyses exist in classified versions of the Trumps security documents. However, as far as we are aware, the main goal of expanding military spending is to create a military that is able to fight any foe at any place and win, the cost be damned. To the current administration this simply means having the most capable military on the planet, although it is unclear what use is intended for it. There is no triage occurring in allocating of resources for the military wherein goals are outlined and military means set against them. This is power for its own sake, and the means have become the end, a situation that Clausewitz himself would be eyeing nervously.

Realism offers a generally sound rubric for evaluating the Trump administration's decision making. However, most schools will not posit that seeking hegemony is the end goal of policy. Additionally, when it comes to nuclear weapons, defensive realism generally holds that once a level of assured destruction is achieved, then nuclear weapons hold less value as they cannot ever be used. The Trump administration clearly is not satisfied with it's level of deterrence, despite the reality that it has more than

enough warheads to assure the destruction of any adversary. In a traditional realist paradigm, cooperation should be pursued in order to increase stability and decrease miscalculations. Under offensive realism, a state can still engage in cooperation in order to create more safety for themselves, but they will still engage in nuclear competition.¹⁶⁵ The Trump administration certainly seems willing to do this, and is even doubling down on nuclear weapons being foundational to American defense (at least on paper). Given the rejection of previous administration's trajectory on nuclear reduction, the fear it has of supposed Russian superiority in tactical capabilities, and primacy of place it grants China as a nuclear adversary (despite the massive asymmetry in warheads), it is clear that the Trump administration sees nuclear competition as necessary to American security. Offensive realism offers a rationale for this: nations will seek hegemony through nuclear arms which could be achieved through technological breakthroughs. The US must continue to compete and outmatch its adversaries on every level of nuclear competition, lest some technological breakthrough render its strike capabilities null. Given the Trump administration's general penchant for pursuing hegemony, the nuclear appears to fit neatly within it. If one wants to explain the Trump nuclear strategy, as well as current US foreign and security policies, Mearsheimer's offensive realism appears to offer the most coherent explanation.

¹⁶⁵ Mearsheimer, Pg. 134.

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