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The Trump Presidency: Continuity and Change in US Foreign Policy¹

All presidents promise change. Few presidents, however, promised change as radical as Donald Trump. In the course of the 2016 election campaign Trump declared that NATO, was 'obsolete', that America's alliances with Japan and South Korea were unaffordable and that free trade agreements were a 'disaster' that had only led to the United States being 'ripped off'. In place of the positive-sum vision of liberal internationalism he proposed a transactional, zero-sum vision in which others' gains were identified as the United States' loss. His solution was 'to take care of this country first before we worry about everybody else in the world' (*New York Times*, 2016a, 2016b, 2016c).

The extent to which Trump implemented his pledge to transform US foreign policy remains hotly debated. A year into the Trump presidency, *Foreign Affairs* magazine asked 'has American foreign policy changed dramatically' under Trump. Of the thirty-one scholars who responded, six 'strongly agreed' that it had, fifteen agreed, four declared themselves neutral and six disagreed (2018). For the majority in the poll group Trump had followed through on his rhetoric since coming to office. Evidence cited included the American withdrawal from a series of multilateral agreements, including the Paris Accords on climate change, the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Evidence was also found in Trump's initiation of trade conflicts with China and the EU and his continued embrace of illiberal regimes (see also Drezner, 2019; Ikenberry, 2018) Sestanovich, 2017; Skidmore, 2018; Wright 2019).

Others, however, emphasized the degree of continuity between the Trump administration and its predecessors. They cited the way in which Trump quickly backed away from his criticisms of NATO

¹ The editors would like to thank the BISA US Foreign Policy Working Group for organising the September 2018 conference from which the papers originated, and for supporting the symposium that brought the authors together to revise them. We would also like to thank the International Relations and Politics subject at Liverpool John Moores University for hosting and co-funding the conference and the symposium. Finally, we would like to thank the Department of History, Politics, and Philosophy at Manchester Metropolitan University for co-funding the symposium.

and recommitted to America's traditional alliances. Similarly, they noted that after some initial inflammatory rhetoric Trump reengaged diplomatically with North Korea and for all his warm words about President Putin, there was no rapprochement with Russia (Abrams, 2017; Carafano, 2017; Carpenter, 2017; Dombrowski, 2018; Daojiong, 2017; Herbert et al 2019; Porter, 2018). John Mearsheimer spoke for this group when he stated that 'if you look beyond President Trump's hot rhetoric, U.S. foreign policy certainly has changed in a handful of ways, but not in most ways, and certainly has not changed dramatically' (*Foreign Affairs*, 2018).

There is, in sum a profound dissensus as to whether Trump transformed US foreign policy (see also Jervis et al, 2018). In part, of course, this is because it takes time before a full assessment of the impact of an administration is possible. Nonetheless, while temporal factors play a part, other variables are also at play here. In particular, the vast majority of recent analysis lacks explicit and/or rigorous engagement with theory and methods. Too much of the analysis involves cherry-picking different bits of empirical data without clear theoretical or methodological justification. How, for example, can we have a meaningful discussion about whether Trump has transformed US foreign policy if we do not first address the problem of how to define and measure change and continuity? The result is a dialogue of the deaf, in which scholars speak past rather than too each other, where the basis for claims about change or continuity is unclear and where the argument, and knowledge, consequently fails to progress.

The chapters collected here begin the effort to rectify this situation by connecting the debate about Trump and change more thoroughly to issues of theory and method. We do not claim that in doing so we have all the answers: the debate is not miraculously resolved; all does not suddenly become clear. There is no consensus amongst the authors either as to which theories and methods one should use, nor as to whether Trump has, or has not, transformed US foreign policy. What we do claim, however, is that by being explicit in our application of theory and methods we take the debate forward, rather than simply going around in circles. We seek to move the debate beyond a focus on the empirical on to more fundamental questions of how we define, measure and explain change. In addressing these questions the chapters here seek to offer a clear, explicit and consistent basis for their selection of

empirical data and interpretation thereof.² That, in turn, allows for informed critique which speaks to, rather than past, those underlying premises and, as a result, a proper academic debate in which our knowledge and understanding of foreign policy change, and Trump's contribution to it, can move forward.

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² The symposium and the research conducted in these pages inspired one of the editors, Matthew, to publish a monograph on using the transformational change framework to examine US democracy promotion. *The rise and fall of democracy promotion in US Foreign Policy: from Carter to Biden* (London: Routledge), 2022.

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