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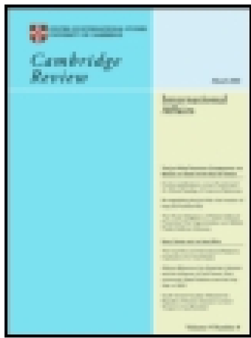

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Principled realism and populist sovereignty in Trump's foreign policy

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Abstract *In the first year of his presidency, Donald Trump rolled out principled realism as the organizing concept of his foreign policy. But does principled realism have any analytical merit as the underlying precept of Trump's foreign policy. This paper explores the Trump administration's use of 'principled realism', its contemporary context and its historical antecedents in American history. It finds that Trump uses it an empty slogan despite the essential tension it embodies in American foreign policy between the normative values and national interests. Instead, 'sovereignty' is a superior organizing principle of Trump's foreign policy. In particular, this paper identifies a form of populist sovereignty that is discernible in his public statements throughout 2018. Populist sovereignty is the most distinctive feature of Trump's foreign policy thinking. It is a doctrine of political action and government priorities that is consonant with his political instincts and that has deep roots in American political culture. Ultimately, populist sovereignty is a much more analytically useful lens through which to understand the foreign policy of Donald Trump.*

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The search for coherence in Donald Trump's foreign policy is an ongoing preoccupation of foreign policy intellectuals. His dramatic flair and sheer quantity of words have kept watchers busy since he announced his candidacy in 2015. Even before his inauguration, scholars were searching for conceptual unity in Trump's campaign proclamations and his decades-long record of public statements (Haines 2017). As the 2016 presidential campaign unfolded, he came to embrace a mixture of nationalism, nostalgia and primacy in order to evoke a return to greatness in American life at home and abroad. From the rostrum on January 2017, Trump's inaugural address portrayed a vision of America being shaken down by a world of cheaters and free-riders. 'America First' was the headline and the plan. Since then, the search for coherence has tried to keep pace with the frenetic pace of the man, the administration and the events that have marked his first half-term. Cognizable unity was elusive. As Gideon Rose put it, 'the Trump administration doesn't yet have a foreign policy, but it does have an instinct' (Rose 2017, 1).

By the end of its first year, the Trump administration arrived at 'principled realism' as its anchor concept and promoted it in major public statements. But does 'principled realism' have conceptual merit as the underlying precept of Donald Trump's foreign policy? The short answer is no. 'Principled realism' is ultimately a slogan, but not one that is devoid of content. Rather, it captures the essential challenge of American foreign policy: reconciling the pursuit of

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self-regarding national interests with fidelity to the normative ideals embedded in America's identity in the world. It is a constant theme that goes back to the founding of a fledgling revolutionary republic and runs through its emergence as a superpower and into the current moment. In that sense, principled realism is nothing new, nor is it a useful way to understand Donald Trump's foreign policy. Despite his administration's efforts, principled realism never took hold as the anchor concept of the Trump Doctrine.

So, if not 'principled realism' then what? A clearer organizing principle of Trump's foreign policy priorities is 'sovereignty'. It bridges his normative vision of what international relations (IR) ought to be, his assertive foreign policy program, his vision of state–society relations, and his partisan instincts. What is more, the way that Trump articulates his vision of sovereignty signals the revitalization of popular sovereignty into American political discourse and practice. But Trump takes it further. He embraces a form of *populist sovereignty* that takes on a Jacksonian commitment to the service of the American 'folk community', hence his appeal to a previous era of prosperity and his broadsides against international commitments that supposedly weaken the country. A close examination of Trump's public statements on foreign policy shows the evolution of his administration's focus away from principled realism and towards a comprehensive understanding of sovereignty. It also helps locate coherence in the protean foreign policy of Donald Trump. The first section of this paper addresses Trump's version of 'principled realism', the context in which it emerged and its historical antecedents in American history. The second section turns to the concept of sovereignty as the unifying concept of the Trump Doctrine. Ultimately, populist sovereignty is a much more analytically useful lens through which to understand the foreign policy of this unusual president.

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Personnel, policy and principled realism

Like many new presidents', Trump's foreign policy ideas did not extend much further than slogans and applause lines of the campaign trail. The first year of his presidency also witnessed conventional and unconventional moves on the world stage including inter alia withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership and the Paris Climate Accord, withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal, renegotiating the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), imposing tariffs on allies, hardening the border with Mexico, threatening North Korea before opening denuclearization negotiations, intensifying the war against ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), sending additional troops to Afghanistan and retaliating against Syria's use of poison gas on civilians (Walt 2018, 221–241). It is no surprise, then, that Trump's foreign policy has been characterized in conflicting ways. He has been called a conservative internationalist (Popescu 2018), a Jacksonian nationalist (Clarke and Ricketts 2017), transactional (Patrick 2017), prestige driven (Wolf 2017), 'surprisingly standard' (Abrams 2017) and even 'normal' (Saunders 2018).

By mid-2017, the Trump administration arrived at a unifying concept for its foreign policy. 'Principled realism' was established in a series of foreign policy pronouncements between May 2017 and January 2018. The phrase instantly became a focal point of debate among Trump's partisans and interpreters.

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Supporters like Newt Gingrich called it a 'titanic shift' in American foreign policy (Gingrich 2017). Detractors called it an 'incoherent mess' (Tharoor 2017). Some academics dismissed it as a mere slogan (Kirkey 2018). Still others tried to find historical precedent and substance in the notion (Joffe 2017). In actuality, the foreign policy worldview of the Trump administration is not as intellectually bankrupt as its harshest critics suggest. Neither is it as coherent as its boosters say. Principled realism draws upon longstanding normative traditions in United States (US) foreign policy history while emphasizing Trump's hawkish and nationalist tendencies. The muddle of principled realism is likely the outcome of clashing worldviews between revisionists and status quo figures in the Trump administration.

Many observers warn against taking Trump's statements too seriously because of his capriciousness with words (Popescu 2018). This caution is well advised though should not be taken too far. While Trump is uniquely undisciplined in his public remarks and on social media, scripted ideas that appear in prepared statements and that are reiterated by administration officials require closer scrutiny. They are likely to have been crafted systematically by the administration's communications office or, more substantively, through an interagency process that attempts to satisfy political, policy and bureaucratic interests (Canican et al 2017). This attempt to reconcile the irreconcilable is part of a much broader story of Trump's foreign policy presidency so far.

In his first half-term, Trump's foreign policy evolved out of a battle between establishment figures and nationalist-revisionist upstarts, many of whom were intimately involved in the election campaign. In office, the President has been informed by these two camps. Nationalist-revisionists promoting a hard-boiled vision of American foreign policy interests confronted status quo internationalists who counsel continuity in US global leadership. The latter group was popularized as the 'adults in the room'—establishment figures drawn from mainstream institutions in the military, politics and big business. By no means sentimental, the presumption was that they would counterbalance the nationalist-revisionists and check the wilder impulses of the president. This group includes ex-military officers and business leaders who, generally, are committed to international alliances, international organizations and free trade—ideas that do not accord with Trump's worldview. Included in this category are the likes of former secretary of defense James Mattis, a retired four-star Marine Corps general; former secretary of state Rex Tillerson, one-time chief executive officer (CEO) of Exxon; Gary Cohn, former director of the National Economic Council, who had previously been president of Goldman Sachs; former chief of staff John F Kelly, also a retired four-star Marine Corps general; former national security advisor HR McMaster, a retired three-star Army general. Establishment figures lamented Trump's disregard for the system of alliances and partnerships which, as James Mattis said in his resignation letter, are inextricably linked to American national strength (Mattis 2018).

Among the nationalist-revisionists are figures mostly drawn from quarters of the American conservative movement which, until then, had been marginal contributors to US foreign policymaking. For varying reasons, they deride many of the shibboleths of the American system of international order. Notable inclusion in this group are hardline Islamophobes like former national security advisor Michael T Flynn, a retired Army lieutenant general, and

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former deputy assistant to the president Sebastian Gorka, a self-styled counter-terrorism expert. More significant, however, are the likes of Stephen K Bannon, Michael Anton and Stephen Miller, whose ethno-cultural nationalism was highly influential on the President. Bannon was a successful Goldman Sachs executive and publisher who served as White House chief strategist until his ouster in July 2017. His worldview is premised on a metaphysics of circular time and, more importantly to Trump, a commitment to Judaeo-Christian cultural superiority and an abiding anti-elitism (Howe 2017; Johnson and Stokols 2017). Anton was a National Security Council spokesman hired by Bannon who served from February 2017 to April 2018. He gained prominence among Trump partisans with a bombastic article decrying the US political establishment as a conspiracy of leftists and their conservative supplicants (Anton 2016). Stephen Miller, a senior advisor to Trump, gained prominence as a partisan agitator and influence in the White House for his hardline anti-immigration stance (Coppins 2018; Flegenheimer 2017). He is one of the few revisionist-nationalists to remain part of the Trump team after two years.

Most significant for the evolution of Trump's foreign policy is John Bolton, a long-time foreign policy practitioner and intellectual who became national security advisor in March 2018. Serving Republican presidents since Reagan, he has stridently rejected global governance and international institutions as inimical to US interests and freedom of action in the world (Bolton 2000, 2008, 2009). Bolton's line of thinking is most consistent with the emergence of sovereignty as the conceptual anchor of Trump's foreign policy. In his published work, Bolton does not display any of the ethno-cultural nationalism of other Trump loyalists. Rather, he objects to international institutions on the grounds that they are unconstitutional and violate the principles of popular sovereignty in the US—a position characteristic of the 'new sovereigntism' (Spiro 2000). Long an outsider position held mainly by constitutional conservatives, this new sovereigntist position has found a home in the Trump administration.

The intellectual influences on Trump's foreign policy program are as striking as they are incompatible. Establishment figures lamented Trump's disregard for the system of alliances and partnerships that, as James Mattis said in his resignation letter, are inextricably linked to American national strength (Mattis 2018). As for the revisionist-nationalists, their intellectual commitments vary but they are unified by a common disdain for the Washington establishment, a disposition towards assertive action and a taste for partisan combat. By the end of 2018, there had been considerable turnover in the administration among personnel in both camps (Mettler et al 2018). In the interim, however, the administration's foreign policy reflected an unsustainable co-existence of these two influences, one that is reflected in Trump's formal and scripted pronouncements (Ettinger 2018). It is within this milieu that 'principled realism' and 'sovereignty' emerged and competed for prominence in Trump's foreign policy thinking. They offer instructive insight into conceptual foundations of the administration and of the man himself.

Donald Trump's principled realism

President Donald Trump began rolling out principled realism slowly through the second half of 2017 but its origins can be traced to the 2016 campaign. The

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earliest iteration was presented in Candidate Trump's first major foreign policy speech in April 2016. Delivered in Washington, Trump laid out his criticism of US foreign policy under Barack Obama and offered his solutions. He hit on conventional realist themes about replacing 'ideology' with strategy and basing foreign policy on core national security interests. More concretely, he articulated a foreign policy committed to military and geostrategic goals: defeating radical Islam, rebuilding military and economic strength, coexistence with Russia and China and rebalancing North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) financial commitments. Each objective is consistent with a realist vision of statecraft and is notably free of the grand ideational commitments to democracy, human rights and human freedom which characterized post-Cold-War foreign policy. However, his concluding point gestured towards an attenuated version of these principles. Though he eschews spreading universal values that 'not everybody shares or wants, we should understand that strengthening and promoting Western civilization and its accomplishments will do more to inspire positive reforms around the world than military interventions' (Trump 2016a). This last point is reminiscent of idealism. Though it is not the grand ambitions of Wilsonian internationalism, it does articulate a commitment to the Western democratic solidarity that supported the post-1945 liberal order. To be sure, the hybrid commitments to realism and circumscribed values marks a break from post-Cold-War assumptions that democratic capitalism ought to be expanded worldwide. But it is much more reflective of Cold War era thinking in which 'the West' consisted of a society of states bound together in a community of fate (Ikenberry 2011).

Throughout 2017, principled realism developed as a talking point for administration officials, bookended by Trump's address to the Arab Islamic American Summit in May and the National Security Strategy (NSS) in December. In Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, Trump sought to rally Arab states to defeat terrorism and identified Iran as the singular destabilizer of the Middle East. In an address to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), he put distance between himself and the transformative agenda of George W Bush: '[w]e are not here to lecture—we are not here to tell other people how to live, what to do, who to be, or how to worship. Instead, we are here to offer partnership—based on shared interests and values—to pursue a better future for us all.' This is a notable break from post-Cold-War precedent whereby US foreign policy promoted the uptake of democracy and human rights in the Middle East. Trump rejected this as an ideologically driven foreign policy, premised on grand ambitions and not outcomes on the ground. Here is where 'principled realism' is used for the first time. 'We are adopting', he says, 'a Principled Realism, rooted in common values and shared interests' (Trump 2017a). It is obvious that shared interests between the US and his Arab hosts are snuffing out terrorism and containing Iran. The common values are not as clear.

Over the next seven months in 2017, Trump and administration officials would return to principled realism, regularly repeating the line about principled realism being rooted in shared goals, interests and values. In each instance, the realist properties were more identifiable than the principles at stake. As the talking point evolved, the contradictions in the administration's understanding of principled realism became more obvious. Principled realism was cited by Trump and his officials in remarks about Cuba in June (Trump

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2017b), and again in August in remarks on his Afghanistan strategy in which he renounced democratic nation-building (Trump 2017c). In September, Trump rearticulated principled realism in his address to the United Nations (UN) General Assembly, in a speech noted for its aggressive posturing (Trump 2017d). Two months later in November, Vice President Pence invoked principled realism with reference to stated intentions of greater assertiveness in foreign policy (Pence 2017). In early December, National Security Advisor HR McMaster deployed the term, noting that the objectives of US foreign policy derive from national interests, not ideology (McMaster 2017). In December 2017, Trump invoked principled realism in his proclamation recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel (Trump 2017e).

The signal expression of principled realism came in December 2017 with the release of the administration's NSS. The NSS contains the fullest elaboration of principled realism and exposes its contradictions. In it, Trump disavows the post-1945 paradigm of liberal internationalism. But he does not make a clean break from the prevailing grand strategy of the US. The NSS defines principled realism as a strategy guided by outcomes and not ideology, premised on a geopolitical worldview with 'strong, sovereign, and independent nations' at its centre. The realist dimension is derived from its affirmation of the 'central role of power in international politics' and its affirmation that 'sovereign states are the best hope for a peaceful world'. The principled dimension of the strategy comes from its grounding in 'the knowledge that advancing American principles spreads peace and prosperity around the globe' (US 2017, 55).

The document continues with a turn of phrase that captures the paradox of principled realism: 'we are guided by our values and disciplined by our interests'. This phrase is puzzling because it inverts the core ideas at play. If the intellectual inheritance of academic realism has any meaning, a realist foreign policy ought to be directed by national interests, not by values. To a realist, 'discipline' arises from pragmatism and wise leadership, calculations of resources, and perhaps even national values. Certainly, it will be informed by the nature of anarchy and the distribution of power and threat in the world. But by assigning value commitments as the guiding light of foreign policy, Trump's NSS inadvertently embraces a caricaturized version of idealism. Despite this formulation, there is little ambiguity in the NSS's realist worldview. It frames the global security environment as a competition for power, upholds the value of deterring adversaries and puts an end to the unipolar moment by heralding a return to geopolitics. It even appeals to the timeless nature of contests for influence (US 2017, 26). There are appeals to 'clear-eyed assessments' of US interests and a view that global security depends on sovereign states. The principled components are more ambiguous, hinting at the place of American principles as 'a lasting force for good in the world' (White House 2017). Ultimately, the intellectual content of realism and liberalism coexist uneasily in this document and in Trump's public statements. It is the balance of realism and principle that distinguishes Trump's 'principled realism' from similar formulations made by previous administrations.

In 2018, principled realism would appear less frequently in Trump's remarks and those of his officials. The concept would be invoked in January 2018 by Press Secretary Sarah Sanders in response to the passage of the

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National Defense Authorization Act by the House of Representatives, and again in August by Vice President Mike Pence (Sanders 2018; Pence 2018). In Donald Trump's second address to the UN General Assembly, principled realism re-emerged with sharper edges: 'America's policy of principled realism means we will not be held hostage to old dogmas, discredited ideologies, and so-called experts who have been proven wrong over the years, time and time again' (Trump 2018a). By 2018, principled realism, however, began taking on the baggage of the exceedingly partisan politics of America's domestic politics.

Principled realism and its antecedents

Throughout the 2016–2018 period, principled realism remained a mostly ephemeral notion with hints of substance. Detractors who dismiss it as *merely* a slogan miss an important point. Principled realism embodies a tension that runs deep in the intellectual formation of US foreign policy, with antecedents that run throughout American history. In name or in spirit, 'principled realism' has been used in various ways to characterize US foreign policy for two-and-a-half centuries.

Within US foreign policy is a tension between the high-minded idealism of its own sense of exceptionalism. It is not by accident that US leaders have variously characterized their country as an 'asylum to the persecuted of the earth' (Washington), the 'last best hope for mankind' (Lincoln), a 'shining city on a hill' (Reagan), an indispensable nation (Albright) and, since World War II, the leader of the free world. While US leaders pronounced upon America's exceptional world-historical place, leaders did not neglect the self-regarding nature of the national interest. This inherent tension is a feature of both conservative and liberal traditions in US foreign policy. The Wilsonian tradition of values-driven internationalism evolved in order to avoid the fate of its tradition's namesake. After World War II, the North Atlantic political settlement rested upon the preponderant power of the United States and the consent of Western Europe to make the post-war order work (Ikenberry 2001). Less enamoured with the expansionary idealism of liberals, but principled nonetheless, a conservative tradition draws from John Quincy Adams's admonition that America 'is the well-wisher to the freedom and independence of all. She is the champion and vindicator only of her own.' This instinct is an amalgam of principled positions moderated by realist prudence. In the early nineteenth century, Adams recognized that the revolutionary principles that underpin the American political system are what drives its example to the world. Idealism inspires well-wishing; prudence keeps the foreign-monster-destroying search party at home. Thus, conservative and liberal traditions of US foreign policy seek to forge an alloy of principle and pragmatism. It goes by various names in American history. In the Trumpian moment, it is articulated as 'principled realism'.

It should come as no surprise that US foreign policy practice does not fit any specific IR theoretical paradigm. Reading US foreign policy history through the IR lenses of realism and liberalism/idealism can become an act of confirmation bias. The case of US foreign policy is especially intriguing, since it is unlike the European cases on which the formulation of IR realism and liberalism was founded. Walter Russell Mead makes a classic exceptionalist case

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about US foreign policy, arguing that it does not neatly 'live up to Continental [realist] models of what states should look like' because it has a foreign policy orientation of its own (Mead 2002, 87). This 'kaleidoscopic' foreign policy bears little resemblance to the realism that connects Bismarck, Carr and Morgenthau, or the idealism that connects Kant, Grotius and the architects of European integration. Rather, the American style derives from different schools of thought that are deeply embedded in American political development, political interests, values and other contingencies. Those schools of thought, famously conceptualized by Mead, are well established in US foreign policy discourse: the Wilsonian faith in international values and bureaucratic expertise, the Hamiltonian commitment to commercial interests the Jeffersonian defence of American liberty and the Jacksonian primacy of the folk nation (Mead 2002; 2017). None of these traditions eschews either power or principle. Rather, it is the valence assigned to each that guides foreign policy practice.

Presidents have long sought to balance the high-minded principles of the republic with the exigencies of geopolitics. Practitioners of purely realist grand strategies are few in US history but many consequential foreign policy presidents have acknowledged the necessary balance between pragmatism and principle, rooted in a distinctively American tradition of foreign policy. Reaching back into the twentieth century and before, the balance of principle and realism have been regular features of US foreign policy thought. Throughout the nineteenth century, presidents struggled to reconcile the nascent power of the United States with its principles, first as it expanded over the continent, then as it expanded further beyond its shores. In a 1792 fictional dialogue between a republican and an anti-republican (later called Federalists), James Madison's republican interlocutor exclaims '[w]hat a perversion of the natural order of things … to make power the primary and central object of the social system, and Liberty but its satellite' (Russell 1995, 717).

Nearly a century later, Theodore Roosevelt attempted to reconcile the exigencies of power and competition with morality. As Greg Russell argues, Roosevelt embraced muscular geopolitics and a philosophical commitment to principles of virtue, righteousness and character in the conduct of foreign affairs. Roosevelt's thinking was neither realist nor idealist, appellations that can only be attributed retroactively. His secretary of state, Elihu Root, said of Roosevelt that '[h]e insisted … that the United States should do justice to all other nations great and small, and … that the United States should insist upon receiving justice from others, and should maintain such moral and physical strength as to command respect' (Russell 2006, 556). In his sweeping interpretation of US foreign policy history, Henry Nau suggests that Presidents Jefferson, Polk, Truman and Reagan championed tenets of spreading freedom disciplined by threat, integrating force and diplomacy, and respect for the popular will (Nau 2013). Though these presidents did not themselves use the term 'principled realism' (nor does Nau apply that moniker), tenets of conservative internationalism fit the bill: realism, with its concern with prudence and power, and principle, with its normative commitments to freedom and popular will.

During the Cold War, the realist's imperative of containing the Soviet Union combined with a liberal order-building project that yielded a hybrid grand strategy for the United States. At once, it deterred its geopolitical

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adversary and led a community of liberal democracies in the maintenance of an open, stable and managed system of world affairs (Ikenberry 2011). Echoes of Trump's principled realism are discernible in the foreign policy thinking of Jeane Kirkpatrick, a stalwart of Ronald Reagan's foreign policy team. Kirkpatrick argued vehemently against the liberal universalism that was embedded in the post-1945 order. She called on the US to 'abandon the globalist approach which denies the realities of culture, character, geography, economics, and history in favor of a vague, abstract universalism' (Yoshitani 2018). As Gail Yoshitani observes, this strain of anti-globalism is palpable in Donald Trump's worldview.

The balance of realism and principle is observable in the grand strategies of Trump's post-Cold-War predecessors as well. George HW Bush was a realist perhaps by disposition but an internationalist in practice. His 1990 NSS observed the collapse of the Soviet Union as a vindication of America's Cold War strategy. Rooting his impression of the future in realism, he declares that, still, US 'goals and interests remain constant … our response will require strategic vision—a clear perception of our goals, our interests, and the means available to achieve and protect them' (US 1990, v). Counterposed to this fundamentally realist admonition is the sentiment, articulated in the 1991 NSS, that the post-Cold-War order will be shaped 'by what we are as a people, for our values are the link between our past and our future, between our domestic life and our foreign policy, between our power and our purpose' (US 1991, v). This is realism and principle interacting as one.

The draft Defense Planning Guidance (DPG) of 1991 articulated this vision unambiguously. Though it was never official policy, the DPG formed the basis of a bipartisan grand strategy that would pursue American military primacy while advancing democracy and free markets economics. By the end of George HW Bush's presidency, US grand strategy had coalesced around an interpretation of primacy that combined overwhelming military might with the spread of American values (Brands 2016, 326–335). Bill Clinton arrived in office with the inclinations of a liberal internationalist, far more committed to principle than to realism. His NSS papers speak of the traditional deployment of hard power resources to promote peace and security. However, expansion, enlargement, interdependence, globalization and human rights promotion are met with far greater enthusiasm in the documents (US 2000). In the mid-1990s, Clinton's Pentagon pursued 'full spectrum dominance' to shape the international environment (US 1997, vi), while his promotion of human rights and democratization placed those that would resist on 'the wrong side of history' (Neikirk and Cloud 1997). In the 2000 election campaign, the cause of principled realism in all but name was articulated by Condoleezza Rice, soon to be a key player in the Bush administration, who insisted that 'the triumph of these values is most assuredly easier when the international balance of power favors those who believe in them' (Rice 2000, 49).

After the attacks of September 11, 2001 George W Bush embraced an expansive view of America's role in the world as a transformative force for democracy. By 2006, this worldview was fully articulated. His 2006 NSS attempted to reconcile the wars raging in the Middle East with the broader purpose: 'The path we have chosen is consistent with the great tradition of American foreign policy. Like the polices of Harry Truman and Ronald

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Reagan, our approach is idealistic about our national goals, and realistic about the means to achieve them' (US 2006, preface). Though the twin pillars of Bush's foreign policy—promoting freedom and ending tyranny, and leading a community of democracies to confront security challenges—proved to be too ambitious, the values-driven use of national power speaks to the principle–realist hybrid.

Barack Obama came to office as a self-conscious internationalist with pragmatic instincts. His 2010 NSS promised a restoration of the international order with a strong US at its centre, all the while advocating for the rights and international norms that underpin American strength in the world. The overview of his NSS begins with a caution that could be torn from Hans Morgenthau: '[to] succeed, we must face the world as it is'. But it goes on to recognize 'the fundamental connection between our national security, our national competitiveness, resilience, and moral example' (US 2010, 1). By the end of his second term, wearied by—among other things—the intractable wars in the Middle East, Obama reflected on his foreign policy approach. In order to advance 'our security interests and those ideals and values that we care about, we've got to be hard headed at the same time as we're bighearted, and pick and choose our spots, and recognize that there are going to be times where the best that we can do is to shine a spotlight on something that's terrible, but not believe that we can automatically solve it' (Goldberg 2016). Or, more to the point: 'don't do stupid shit' (Rothkopf 2014). It is ironic that the most gifted presidential orator in recent memory articulated his pragmatism in the most straightforward terms. This commitment to prudence may not stir the passions but it is hard to deny.

Donald Trump's commitment to 'principled realism' has long historical precedent going back centuries. His predecessors in the post-Cold-War era all articulated worldviews that balanced pragmatism and idealism to differing degrees. In that sense, principled realism is nothing new, and, in its Trumpian formulation, it cannot claim much coherence. It may be that the competing establishment and nationalist-revisionist voices in the administration yielded this unsatisfactory construction. But, whatever the case, Trump's brand of principled realism was quietly abandoned after the first full year of his presidency. As a conceptual anchor, principled realism is a well-established basis for foreign policy, but it does little to clarify the grand strategy of a self-consciously disruptive 'America First' president.

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Sovereignty in Trump's foreign policy thinking

If not 'principled realism' then what is the ideational foundation of Trump's foreign policy thinking. In short, sovereignty. He would appeal to sovereignty in different forms and with greater conviction in the first two years of his presidency. As a foreign policy concept, sovereignty outlasted principled realism and is a stronger analytical basis for understanding a Trump Doctrine. Trump's appeal to sovereignty is distinctive in the post-1945 era. After the founding of the key institutions of the American-led liberal order, presidents rarely concerned themselves much with questions of sovereignty as a matter of grand strategy (Patrick 2018, 75–83). Changing interpretations of sovereignty in the 1990s suggested that the territorial exclusivity of states was becoming

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conditional in the post-Cold-War era (ICISS 2001). But at risk was the sovereignty of states like Somalia, Bosnia and Haiti—not the US. As president, Donald Trump brought perspectives on American sovereignty into mainstream foreign policy debate which had been a minority view since the end of the Cold War.

Trump's view has three dimensions. The first is a sovereign-state worldview in which he envisions a world order composed of self-regarding sovereign states looking after themselves, as opposed to a world of interdependent and integrated countries. In doing so, he has given political force to interpretations of sovereignty, long held by constitutional conservatives, that reject international law and governance. Second, Trump refocuses sovereignty in terms of state–society relations. He draws upon an abiding concern for popular sovereignty in American history. But Trump's innovation is to redefine sovereignty as the duty of government to take care of the people's needs. This notion of sovereignty is quite distinct from conventional understandings of the term. Third, at the level of partisanship, Trump wields the rhetoric of sovereignty against his domestic political opponents. Under the banner of 'sovereignty', Trump integrates his most partisan electoral rhetoric with the nationalist policy agenda and a legitimate vision of world politics. For the most part, this hybrid of innovation and convention has gone unrecognized in the analysis of Trump's approach to the world.

'Sovereignty', of course, is a loaded term with shifting meaning. Stephen Krasner (1999, 9–25) notes that there are four general meanings to the term. *International legal sovereignty* refers to mutual recognition between territorial units with formal juridical independence. *Westphalian sovereignty* refers to political organization based on the exclusion of external actors from authority structures within a given territory. *Domestic sovereignty* refers to the institutional organization of political authority within a state and the authority's capacity to exert effective control. *Interdependence sovereignty* refers to the ability of domestic authorities to regulate the people and things that transit a state's borders. At any given time, each meaning can have greater or lesser influence, be honoured with urgency or observed in the breach—hence Krasner's characterization of sovereignty as a system of 'organized hypocrisy' (Krasner 1999, 9; also see Philpott 2001; Jackson 1999). This list, however, overlooks the peculiarly American commitment to *popular sovereignty*—the theory of political authority that regards 'the people' as the wellspring of all political legitimacy. Many of Trump's public statements and the influence of advisors like John Bolton signal a full-throated endorsement of popular sovereignty. But he goes even further to define sovereignty as the government duty to care for the people and promote its interests, something that can be called *populist sovereignty*. This construction also places 'the people' at the centre of political life, but its implications are considerably different. This notion of populist sovereignty is Trump's most significant adaptation of the meaning of sovereignty in US foreign policy discourse.

No single meaning of 'sovereignty' is fixed or has universal uptake in the international system. Rather, it is a system of norms, rules, institutional arrangements, and power arrangements can vary over time, especially when the individual rulers' preferences change. This last point is key. Krasner's thinking on sovereignty turns on an actor-centric conception in which

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outcomes in the international system are determined by rules that conform or challenge the prevailing understanding of existing arrangements. In a sense, Donald Trump is behaving like a norm entrepreneur, using his institutional platform to generate new norms about sovereignty to shape international and domestic political behaviour in a period of flux (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998). Indeed, sovereignty is a concept that truly organizes Trump's thinking about US foreign policy. The remainder of this section illustrates how Trump rhetoric on sovereignty bridges his worldview, his domestic political commitment and his partisanship.

Sovereignty and Trump's worldview

In foreign affairs, Trump's conception of sovereignty combines elements of international legal Westphalian and interdependence sovereignty. He consistently champions a vision of international order composed of independent and strong countries, free of restraints on their freedom of action. A preoccupation with the corollaries of open borders—immigration and international trade—speak to his abiding concern with interdependence sovereignty. For the most part, Krasner's domestic sovereignty paradigm does not feature in his statements. But Trump adds his twist. His 'America First' nationalism reformulates sovereignty along the lines of state–society relations, or populist sovereignty. In this new construction, sovereignty is a matter of government priorities—specifically, to 'serve the interests of its own people' as the first duty of government (US 2017, 4). This has nothing to do with commonly understood interpretations of sovereignty relating to authority, capacity and recognition in the international system. For Trump, 'America First' really means serving 'Americans first' in an interdependent world. It is, thus, a statement of nationalist retrenchment from the US position as the leader of the post-1945 world order. At the same time, the nationalist overtones speak to the electoral forces that secured his victory in 2016 and sustain his political base. This hybrid notion that combines traditional and innovative notions of sovereignty serves as a stronger foundation for explaining Trump's foreign policy. Recognizing Trumpian sovereignty this way is indispensible to a full understanding of his politicized nationalism on the world stage. Moreover, it helps to understand his use of 'sovereignty' when he wields it as a partisan cudgel.

The common thread in Trump's traditional understanding of sovereignty is a disdain for the paradigm of global institutionalism that commits states to cooperative frameworks for action. In his view, these mechanisms are inimical to the self-determination of states and to their potential prosperity. Trump's repudiation of them is also an effort to free the US from what he regards as unfair restrictions on US freedom of action. In this sense, Trump's worldview firmly embraces the Westphalian conception of sovereignty. It also contains a more positive vision of world politics—the international legal view of a world composed of territorially separate state entities. Here a world of sovereign states, responsible only to themselves but operating cooperatively, underpins Trump's view of how the world ought to work. Or, as he put it in June 2017, 'America believes that free, independent, and sovereign nations are the best vehicle for human happiness, for health, for education, for safety, for everything' (Trump 2017f).

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There are four moments in the development of his sovereign-state worldview. The first was during the GCC summit in May 2017—the same forum where he unveiled 'principled realism'. He declared that 'America is a sovereign nation and our first priority is always the safety and security of our citizens' (Trump 2017a). The joint statement with the GCC took it further, affirming the partners' 'respect for the sovereignty of state, and non-interference in their internal affairs' as well as a rejection of Iran's interference in GCC states, which constitutes a 'violation of sovereignty' and a 'return to respect for the sovereignty of states' (Trump 2017g). The second moment put sharper edges on Westphalian sovereignty. On 1 June 2017, Trump announced the US withdrawal from the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, Paris Agreement. 'Our withdrawal from the agreement', he said, 'represents a reassertion of America's sovereignty'. It protects the US from 'future intrusions on the United States sovereignty [sic] and massive future legal liability' (Trump 2017h). The third iteration of this worldview came during his remarks in Warsaw in July 2017. The speech, to that point, was the most expansive airing of Trump's foreign policy grievances about forces that undermine Western culture from without and the unequal commitments from Western partners. His political broadsides and civilizational discourse drew the most attention but his solutions continued to embrace the international legal sovereignty theme: 'Americans know that a strong alliance of free, sovereign, and independent nations is the best defense for our freedoms and for our interests' (Trump 2017i).

All this foreshadowed the fourth iteration of Trump's sovereignty-based worldview over a four-month period in late 2017. If the Warsaw speech was the fullest airing of grievances, his address to the UN General Assembly in September 2017 presented the most cogent articulation of the sovereign-state worldview. It contained the essence of international legal sovereignty. The success of the UN, he said, depends 'on a coalition of strong and independent nations that embrace their sovereignty to promote security, prosperity, and peace for themselves and for the world' (Trump 2017d). Eschewing the universal values expounded by his predecessors, Trump laid out his expectations about the two core sovereign duties of states: 'to respect the interests of their own people and the rights of every other sovereign nation'. Mutual respect serves as the basis for co-existence and cooperation among different countries with different cultures. This vision is new among presidents in the post-1945 era. There is no appeal to common interests, moral duties or shared burdens such as previous presidents noted. Rather, territorial and cultural exclusivity, demarcated by sovereign domains—Westphalian sovereignty—serves as an organizing principle of this worldview.

Trump took this reworked definition to East Asia in November 2017. At the South Korean National Assembly on 8 November, he affirmed the domestic and Westphalian meanings of sovereignty in the South Korean context (Trump 2017j). At a press conference with Chinese premier Xi Jinping on 9 November, he affirmed the Westphalian notion again, citing the importance of respecting 'each other's sovereignty and territorial integrity, [and] choice of development path and our difference' (Trump 2017k). At the Asia–Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in Vietnam on 10 November, Trump remarked on his bilateral approach to economic relations. Rather than pursue multilateral

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agreements like the Trans-Pacific Partnership, '[i]nstead, we will deal on a basis of mutual respect and mutual benefit. We will respect your independence and your sovereignty.' And shortly thereafter: '[w]e will never ask our partners to surrender their sovereignty … [w]e are nations that respect our citizens, cherish our liberty, treasure our sovereignty, and control our own destiny' (Trump 2017l). Upon his return to the US, Trump's summation encapsulated this worldview which combined international legal, Westphalian and his own meaning of 'sovereignty': 'I have carried our vision for a better—a vision for something stronger and sovereign—so important—sovereign and independent nations, rooted in their histories, confident in their destinies, and cooperating together to advance their security, prosperity, and the noble cause of peace' (Trump 2017m).

Throughout 2017 and 2018, Trump articulated this worldview which seems crafted in the image of nineteenth-century Europe. It is a decidedly modernist version predicated on state sovereignty as the overriding principle accompanied by the prohibition of external interference in domestic affairs (Cooper 2003, 21–26). Trends towards integration and interdependence, global governance and international law are to be eschewed in favour of self-reliance. It also harkens back to a much older nation-state ideal in which the identity of the population and the juridical boundaries are coterminous.

Sovereignty and state–society relations

Sovereignty understood as state-society relations is the bridge between Trump's normative worldview of IR and his nationalist domestic agenda. This includes his fidelity to popular sovereignty and the conservative case for rejecting international law and governance. As Stewart Patrick (2018) points out, popular sovereignty is a unique American contribution to the theory and practice of foreign policy. Understanding the domestic politics of American foreign policy requires an appreciation for the ambivalence towards anything that would constrain US freedom of action or submit its people to foreign decision-makers.

The history of political trepidation in America about international involvement and the concern for sovereignty runs deep. This was the essence of the American political experiment in 1776 and is hardwired into the political culture. A concern for popular sovereignty is observable in the debates over the terms of the Constitution in the 1780s and legislation and court decisions throughout the nineteenth century (Patrick 2018, 42–58). In foreign policy, the consolidation of Westphalian sovereignty involved avoiding entanglements in the affairs of Europe and was an animating feature of the young republic. Concern for sovereignty informed Washington's farewell address cautioning against 'permanent alliances', John Quincy Adams's precautions against going abroad in search of monsters to destroy, the Monroe Doctrine and the conquest of the continent. In the twentieth century, Congress's rejection of the League of Nations and interwar isolationism were driven by concerns over international restrictions on American freedom of action. The post-1945 order-building project was revolutionary in that it dispensed with a century-and-a-half of practice by binding the US to a system of institutional constraints (Herring 2008, 650).

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The post-Cold-War period expanded the scope of the liberal order truly worldwide.

The paradox of American sovereignty is that the US spent enormous energy fostering the conditions of interdependence after 1945, yet it remains protective of its own sovereignty. The trade-offs between unfettered sovereignty and the bonds of interdependence during the Cold War were worthwhile as long as they served US foreign priorities and domestic constituencies. But as the bargain broke down, first during the 1990s wave of globalization, then especially after the 2008 recession, the sovereigntist objection gained resonance. So too did the criticism that allies had been free-riding on the American-led NATO system that bound the US to the defence of Europe. The 2016 presidential election was the turning point. Donald Trump's rejection of US foreign policy as a 'complete and total disaster' resonated sufficiently with voters who saw in him a candidate who could restore an idealized status quo ante of domestic prosperity and international esteem. This would be achieved, he insisted, by repatriating US sovereignty, thereby putting America and Americans first.

Trump's articulation of populist sovereignty is the most distinctive feature of his foreign policy thinking. In Trump's formulation, populist sovereignty is a doctrine of political action and government priorities. It is consonant with Trump's instincts as a politician and has deep roots in American political culture. Walter Russell Mead characterizes this Jacksonian impulse as the feeling that 'government should do everything in its power to promote the well-being—political, moral, economic—of the folk community' (Mead 1999/2000, 15). The first hint of populist sovereignty was articulated in the same speech in which he withdrew from the Paris Climate Accord. 'I have one obligation,' he declared, 'and that obligation is to the American people. The Paris accord would undermine our economy, hamstring our workers, weaken our sovereignty, impose unacceptable legal risk, and put us at a permanent disadvantage to the other countries of the world' (Trump 2017h). This idea of populist sovereignty was stated more forcefully at the UN General Assembly in September 2017, where he made sovereignty synonymous with the duty of government to take care of its own population. He said, 'Our Government's first duty is to its people, to our citizens: to serve their needs, to ensure their safety, to preserve their rights, and to defend their values … Our respect for sovereignty is also a call for action. All people deserve a government that cares for their safety, their interests, and their well-being, including their prosperity' (Trump 2017d).

A few months after the UN General Assembly speech, the Trump administration released its NSS, which reiterated the new understanding of populist sovereignty. An awkward but crucial passage reads, 'strengthening our sovereignty—the first duty of a government is to serve the interests of its own people—is a necessary condition for protecting' national interests (US 2017, 4). This reformulation is important and, in effect, creates a new definition of the concept itself. It goes beyond the traditional understandings of sovereignty (as summarized by Krasner) and makes them synonymous with serving the interests of domestic populations—the very essence of 'America First'. Conventionally understood, sovereignty has nothing to do with the priorities of a government. The Trumpian notion of sovereignty, however, embraces the

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exclusivity meaning and weds it with Trump's politicized meanings. If that means assailing the post-1945 international order, or adopting economic nationalism or dispensing with Republican Party orthodoxy, then so be it, as long as it improves the lot of the people. So-called 'unfair' trade agreements like the Trans-Pacific Partnership, NAFTA, the Korea–US Free Trade Agreement have all come into Trump's crosshairs. His imposition of steel and aluminium tariffs on allies (Canada) and competitors (China) alike is meant to bolster the fortunes of domestic producers. In this way the normative ideal of a Westphalian world and the prescription to defend sovereignty are rooted in the populist, America First nationalism that won him the presidency.

Sovereignty as Trump's cudgel

It is impossible to talk about Donald Trump without talking about his relentless campaign of partisan warfare. The third use of sovereignty is as a cudgel against his domestic adversaries whom he charged with selling out the American people. Similarly to Trump's sovereignty-as-worldview, the deployment of sovereignty as a partisan weapon also articulates an abiding concern for Westphalian sovereignty. Observation of Trump's statements certainly demonstrates as much. But what is important is how rich 'sovereignty' is as a rhetorical device and how it resonates with his constituency. Conceptually, it encapsulates his worldview and his Jacksonian dispositions. Rhetorically, it bridges the nefarious international forces that have been hostile to the United States, and the various evils that have befallen the country, especially in the post-2008 period.

During the 2016 presidential campaign, sovereignty as 'Americans first' was still gestating. Trump wielded sovereignty against Hillary Clinton by setting American sovereignty as what was at stake in the election. In the late stages of the campaign, he connected his opponent to an international cabal that was ostensibly undermining the US. Clinton, he declared, is the 'vessel for a corrupt global establishment that is raiding our country and surrendering our sovereignty. This criminal government cartel doesn't recognize borders, but believes in global governance, unlimited immigration, and rule by corporations' (Trump 2016b). That same day he declared that 'we will never surrender the freedom and sovereignty of the United States. It's going to be America first' (Trump 2016c). A few days later he proclaimed that 'Hillary Clinton meets in secret with international banks to plot the destruction of US sovereignty in order to enrich these global financial powers' (Trump 2016d). However absurd the claims were, the feeling that Hillary Clinton was plotting to destroy the sovereignty of the US resonated with audiences. Trump even pointed to the Brexit referendum as an example of America's way out of this morass. The British, Trump said, 'voted to liberate themselves from global government and global trade deals and global immigration deals that have destroyed their sovereignty' (Trump 2016d). After his inauguration, the use of sovereignty as a cudgel did not stop. In July 2017, he turned the cudgel on his favourite foil: '[t]he dishonest media will never keep us from accomplishing our objectives on behalf of our great American people … We will save American lives, protect American sovereignty, and we will ensure the forgotten men and women of our country are never forgotten again' (Trump 2017n).

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In August 2017, Trump turned his cudgel upon the Washington establishment who 'gave us one terrible trade deal after another, who gave us one foreign policy disaster after another, and who sacrificed our sovereignty, our wealth, and our jobs' (Trump 2017o). In each instance, sovereignty-as-worldview and sovereignty-as-cudgel work to situate his opponents not only as his political adversaries, but as hostile to the interests of America itself.

After returning from the East Asia trip in early December 2017, on which he had peddled his vision of sovereignty as a worldview, Trump deployed it at a partisan rally: 'America is a sovereign country. We set our immigration rules. We don't listen to foreign bureaucrats. We don't listen to other countries telling us how we should be running our immigration.' And he railed against '[t]he Washington insiders who oppose our movement are the same people who sacrificed our sovereignty, our wealth, our borders' (Trump 2017p). The next month in the State of the Union Address on 30 January 2018, the use of sovereignty was more cudgel than conceptual. Regarding his decision to move the US embassy in Israel to Jerusalem: 'I recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. Shortly afterwards, dozens of countries voted in the United Nations General Assembly against America's sovereign right to make this decision' (Trump 2018b). In a veiled threat, he then asked Congress to pass legislation on foreign assistance to penalize countries that did not support the US decision.

Partisan rhetoric may be dismissed as crude and outside the remit of foreign policy analysis. But increasingly, partisanship is entering as a consideration of US foreign policy (Schultz 2017). In Donald Trump's case, hyper-partisan discourse it is an integral piece of his political identity and programme. Sovereignty is the fundamental political commitment and the bridging device that connects all aspects of his foreign policy. When used in the partisan context, 'sovereignty' turns the defence of American sovereignty into a partisan cudgel to wield against his opponent. Typically, Trump presents sovereignty as something that needs to be defended from malign foreign forces. In his domestic policy agenda, sovereignty is presented as synonymous with government servicing the interests of domestic constituencies—'America First' means putting 'Americans first'. At the most sophisticated level, Trump's use of sovereignty reaffirms a state-centric worldview in which juridically separate territorial entities ought to be the basis of international politics. Indeed, 'sovereignty' is the concept that underpins the Trump administration's approach to the world. Principled realism does not have the same comprehensiveness.

Conclusion

The eventful first two years of the Trump administration have brought core issues of political science and IR into sharp relief. This paper has addressed but one: the matter of the Trump administration's underlying ideational commitment in foreign policy. As this paper shows, principled realism rose to prominence but was quietly abandoned while sovereignty continued to play a comprehensive role in Donald Trump's worldview. Many questions remain to be addressed and, undoubtedly, Trump will have scholars asking more before his presidency ends. This paper concludes with two questions.

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The first question is empirical. Do the first two years of Trump's foreign policy practice adhere to the conceptual parameters of sovereignty or principled realism? Across key foreign policy domains—national security, economic relations, alliance relations—the Trump administration's actions are not always consistent with the underlying ideas. It has embraced elements of conventional US foreign policy—such as the continuation of the war against ISIS and increases in defence spending—while forging new approaches in other areas like trade confrontation with allies and competitors alike. Hence the characterizations of his foreign policy as both an attack on world order and surprisingly standard (Lynch 2018; Saunders 2018). A full accounting of his frenetic first term is beyond the scope of this paper. Thus, consistency or coherence in practice is hard to identify. The ideas that underpin the broader foreign policy approach may also seem erratic. However, as this paper shows, a certain foreign policy rationale has developed out of Trump's nationalist instincts in his first half-term. It is not the 'principled realism' so highly touted by Trump's proponents, but 'sovereignty'—both understood in conventional terms and reinterpreted to suit his America First agenda. This, more than any other concept, is unique to the Trump administration's approach to the world and the one that marks the most pronounced ideational discontinuity in US foreign policy since the end of World War II.

The second question is theoretical. Is Trump's comprehensive meaning of 'sovereignty', including its populist reformulation, going to influence world politics or generate new norms? It is not outside the realm of possibility. As Barkin and Cronin (1994, 108) remind us, 'the rules of sovereignty vary, and thus the concept is neither fixed nor constant'. A powerful leader in the international system has a unique and powerful platform from which to affect change in world politics. President Trump is no different and is outfitted with the political power and personal disposition to plough through longstanding norms of diplomacy. The world has already witnessed the 'Trump effect' in countries around the world where demagogic leaders have claimed the mantle of leadership over populist movements. While right-wing populism and demagoguery pre-date Trump, it is unlikely that the ascent of these leaders would have been possible without the influence of his example and success. Given the time and political capital, it is not unthinkable that Trumpian sovereignty may become the principle on which IR operates. On this last point, only time will tell.

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