Embracing the Maverick: The Evolution of President Donald Trump's Management of Foreign Policy-Making

Luis da Vinha
Flinders University, ORCiD: 0000-0002-7222-5095, corresponding author: luis.davinha@flinders.edu.au

Anthony Dutton
Valley City State University, ORCiD: 0000-0002-7199-6330

Abstract
Research on the American presidency reveals that all presidential advisory systems follow a similar pattern of change over time from standard, formal interagency structures to informal structures in which decisions are made outside the traditional interagency processes. We employ a longitudinal comparative case design to analyze the dynamics of the Trump administration's foreign policy-making to explain how Trump's management of foreign policy decision-making evolved over his tenure in office. By using a focused-structured comparison to analyze five foreign policy case studies, we argue that Trump confirms the main tenets of the evolution model of presidential policy-making which claims that, over time, presidents increasingly rely on informal and ad hoc decision-making structures and processes. However, rather than adopt structures and processes that assured a broad deliberation of options, Trump increasingly sought information and policy options that confirmed his pre-existing beliefs or preferences, replacing individuals in his administration who challenged his views and consolidating the decades-long trend of the personalization of foreign policy decision-making in the hands of the president.

Introduction

In 2016, Donald Trump ran for the presidency of the United States with the promise of overturning entrenched politics as most Americans had traditionally known them. Throughout the presidential campaign, Trump eviscerated the political establishment in Washington, tarring them with the epithets of stupidity, incompetence and corruption. Domestically, Trump lambasted his predecessors for their economic policies. On the international front, Trump scorned decision-makers in Washington for weakening America's global standing by squandering resources, permitting allies to swindle the U.S. and allowing both allies and adversaries to hold American power in contempt (c.f. Trump 2016).

For decades, most presidential candidates have presented themselves as agents of change, whose ultimate goal is to transform politics in Washington. However, more than any modern presidential candidate, Trump pushed the boundaries of what was traditionally considered acceptable language and behaviour (Lieberman et al. 2019). The bellicosity of Trump's campaign rhetoric was characteristic of his actions as a real-estate developer and businessman. For over four decades, Donald Trump had built and expanded his business organisation by employing the same boisterous and truculent behavior. He was renowned for his erratic and contradictory attitude which resulted in inconsistent decisions (Kruse 2016). In fact, Trump had a long history of rejecting professional advice and following his own inclinations, building a reputation for being a reckless entrepreneur who had made a name for himself by regularly stretching the truth and browbeating his adversaries and critics (Kranish & Fischer 2017).

Trump's unorthodox style raised concerns as the 2016 presidential campaign proceeded. Several months prior to the election, several prominent U.S. newspapers appealed to their readers not to vote for Trump due to concerns regarding his fitness for the office (The New York Times 2016; The Washington Post 2016; USA Today 2016). A similar sentiment of apprehension existed among numerous conservatives and GOP officials (Blake 2016; Caldwell 2016). Notwithstanding these concerns, Republican leaders expected Trump to slowly pivot away from his campaign mode and 'behave himself' upon winning the presidency (Coppins 2017). This assumption was bolstered by several commentators and academics who assured the public that the institutional presidency would rein in Trump's most dangerous impulses (Luttwak 2017; Mearsheimer 2017). Others, while reluctant to vouch for the president himself, were confident that he would

surround himself with 'the best and the brightest' and that these individuals would ultimately be responsible for developing the administration's policies (Landler 2016).

These views reflected the long-held assumption in American society that the institution of the presidency has a moderating effect on the behaviour of any president (Denton, Jr. 1983). Research on presidential policy-making argues that the main challenge facing the president is not the lack of information, but rather the capacity to manage and process the vast amount of available data, intelligence and perspectives. As Rudalevige (2005: 338) points out, 'for reasons of time and cognitive capacity, no president could usefully receive as much information as exists on any given topic.' Therefore, in order to overcome these obstacles, presidents implement advisory systems to help them organise and make sense of the plethora of available information. While the choice of personnel is important, researchers emphasise the relevance of the advisory structures created to help organise the decision-making processes (Burke 2009; Rudalevige 2009).

However, research on the presidency reveals that decision-making structures and processes change over time. More precisely, research on U.S. national security attests to the fact that over time, all presidential administrations follow a similar pattern of change from formal to informal decision-making structures and processes (Newmann 2015). The specific leadership traits of each individual president are critical in determining which of these structures will ultimately reign over foreign policy. As William Newmann (2004) notes, each president will rely on different structures depending on their particular leadership styles.

This paper seeks to build on and extend the previous work on the evolution of presidential foreign policy-making by analysing how Trump's management of foreign policy-making evolved over his presidency. In order to address this research question, we undertook longitudinal research by means of the comparative case study method. In contrast to traditional studies on foreign policy decision-making which tend to focus on particular policy episodes, longitudinal research allows for the observation of a small number of subjects over an extended period of time in order to identify and explain change in one or more variables of interest (Menard 2008). The case studies are examined using a structured-focus comparison which involves asking a set of standardised, general questions of each individual case in order to assure the controlled comparison of the data from the cases (cf. George 2019). The questions framing the analyses are: 1) What is the role of the president in the advisory system? 2) What is the role and relationship amongst the advisors in the advisory system? 3) What are the procedures for managing the advisory system? and 4) What is the general dynamic of the decision-making process? The first question seeks to assess the style and the level of involvement of each president, particularly the level of centralisation of

the process, as well as the relationship between the president and his advisors. The second question focuses on the relationship amongst the president's main foreign policy advisors in an attempt to assess if they compete for the president's attention or cooperate in the deliberation process. The third question examines the procedures characterising the deliberations, namely identifying if main processes involve formal or informal channels of communication and advice. The final question seeks to identify the pervasive pattern of interaction amongst the president, his advisors and any others providing input for the final decision. This question also provides an opportunity to determine if there were any changes to the president's decision-making structures and processes over time.

In order to maintain greater control over the situational variables, three criteria guided our case selection by narrowing the universe of foreign policy decision-making instances. First, the cases were all situations of unilateral U.S. foreign policy decision-making. While in some instances the U.S. did involve or cooperate with other international actors, the decision processes determining U.S. policy were all initiated and carried out unilaterally by American decision-makers, rather than in a multilateral framework. Second, all of the cases involve decisions regarding equivalent opponents. The policies specifically address a host of states that are similar in terms of their relationship with the U.S. More specifically, despite the fact each state differs in size and resources, they all share an asymmetric power relationship with their American counterpart. In other words, the relationship between the actors reveals a significant disparity with respect to the elements of military, economic and political power broadly construed and that favour the U.S. This situation reinforces the previous criterion since research reveals that asymmetric relationships tend to lead the more powerful actor to act unilaterally and reject mediation (Quinn et al. 2006). Third, the cases share a commensurable political context in order to minimise the number of potentially confounding variables. More precisely, we have geographically circumscribed the cases to the Greater Middle East region in order to maintain greater control over the situational variables. As a result, we have selected the following five cases, over the four years of the Trump presidency, which we subsequently analyse using the structured-focus questions identified above: the surge in Afghanistan, the U.S. military strikes in Syria (2017 and 2018), the cancelation of the strike on Iran after the downing of a U.S. drone, the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Syria and the killing of Iranian General Qasem Suleimani.

Managing foreign policy decision-making

Information is the key currency in foreign policy decision-making. A good advisory system should provide presidents with the information and advice they

need to decide on a particular policy issue. However, the main challenge facing the president of the United States is not the lack of information, but rather the capacity to manage and process the vast amount of available data, intelligence and perspectives. As Rudalevige (2005: 338) points out, 'for reasons of time and cognitive capacity, no president could usefully receive as much information as exists on any given topic.' Therefore, in order to overcome these obstacles, presidents implement advisory systems to help them organise and make sense of the plethora of available information. While the choice of personnel is important, researchers have emphasised the relevance of the advisory structures created to help organise the decision-making processes (Burke 2009; Rudalevige 2009).

Political scientists have identified three models to explain how presidents manage their advisory systems: the formalistic model, the collegial model and the competitive model (George 1981; Johnson 1974; Porter 1988). In the formalistic model, the president centralises the advisory system in his White House staff which is responsible for managing the information flow to and from the president. In this system, cabinet heads of departments and agencies are responsible for collecting and forwarding information and advice from their subordinate units through formal channels of communication. This process is centred predominantly around briefing papers prepared by the department or agencies. As a result, the president endorses a division-of-labour among the departments and agencies based on their functional expertise and advisors provide information exclusively on the policy area under their jurisdiction. The formalistic model is predicated on the belief that there are optimal policies that can be identified and implemented by breaking down problems into their pros and cons and emphasising their technical criteria and considerations.

In contrast, the collegial model favours an inclusive advisory process that emphasises negotiation and compromise. In this system, advisors serve as a 'problem-solving' team by openly airing and discussing their differing views and the president is directly exposed to their competing arguments and proposals. Rather than maintaining their role as functional experts, advisors are encouraged to act as policy generalists and policy discussions are kept informal enough to encourage open deliberation of the competing assessments and proposals. While the collegial model requires the active involvement of the president, it exposes him to the trade-offs involved in each proposal and allows him to try and reconcile them in the formulation of policy. Inherently, this implies that the resulting policies are usually 'substantively sound and politically doable' (Johnson 1974: 7).

Finally, in the competitive model the president purposely encourages competition among his advisors and heads of cabinet by attributing overlapping assignments and authority to individuals on an ad hoc basis. In this model, the

president centralises the decision-making process on himself and communication or collaboration among the advisors is minimal. Moreover, the president uses the multiple channels of communication to engage directly with subordinates in the bureaucracy, circumventing the cabinet and the heads of agencies.

The models of presidential management are ideal-type constructs which are particularly helpful as conceptual frameworks for analysing how presidents manage foreign policy decision-making. In practice they are not mutually exclusive, and presidents do adopt different elements from each model. More significantly, research reveals that decision-making structures and processes change over time. In particular, Newmann (2015) argues that, with regard to national security decision-making, all presidential administrations follow a similar pattern of change. More precisely, according to Newmann, every administration begins by employing a standard, formal interagency structure (centred on the National Security Council [NSC]) as the main hub for the decision-making processes. However, over time, each administration develops informal structures and presidential confidence structures in which decisions are made outside the traditional standard interagency processes. Using a series of case studies, Newmann showcases how, over time, presidents as different as Eisenhower, Kennedy, Reagan and George H. W. Bush overcame the burdens of the standard decision-making structures by using informal advisory groups consisting of their most trusted advisors to reach key foreign policy decisions. Ultimately, Newmann's research has consistently demonstrated that, throughout their time in office, each individual president 'will implicitly or explicitly arrange his advisors in a hierarchy, from a first among-equals advisor who has a unique relationship with the president, down to other important advisors often included in the informal structure, down to those advisors who may be NSC participants but not part of the informal structure' (Newmann 2004: 300). Similarly, by studying the personal interactions between Presidents Nixon and Carter and their advisors, Michael Link (2000) identified a pattern where both presidents moved away from formal group deliberations to favouring informal meetings with their network of most trusted advisors. A comparable dynamic is revealed by Luis da Vinha's research on the Carter administration. In analysing the development of the administration's Middle East policy, the author demonstrates how Carter's increasing reliance on informal decision-making structures allowed Brzezinski and the NSC staff to direct foreign policy decision-making by controlling access to the president, as well the information and advice he received (da Vinha 2016).

The specific leadership traits of each individual president are critical in determining which of these structures will ultimately reign over foreign policy. As Newmann (2004: 273) notes, 'the origins, use, and interactions between these

structures are dependent on the leadership style of the president and will vary from administration to administration; different presidents come to rely on different structures.' However, several other factors contributing to changes in advisory structures have been identified. For instance, Walcott and Hult (1995) argue that the political environmental and organisational dynamics are two important explanatory factors in determining staff structures. With regard to the environmental factors, the authors highlight the role of other governmental actors, the public and technology as possible influences on how governance structures may evolve over time. In terms of the organisational dynamics, the authors point out that the unpredictable nature of change can lead to the emergence of structures that generate resistance and internal conflict. These organisational dynamics are particularly important when analysing the Trump administration, since research reveals that Trump is a 'political maverick' whose 'mercurial personality and instinctual behaviour have hindered the development of a thoughtful and structured advisory process' (da Vinha 2019: 300). More importantly, numerous reports revealed the existence of numerous internal struggles and the development of several informal structures that not only fostered institutional dysfunction, but also sought to manipulate the decision-making process by circumventing the president (Idem; Woodward 2018).

The surge in Afghanistan

After only 24 days on the job, General Michael Flynn resigned as the Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs (APNSA) and was replaced by General H. R. McMaster, whose first goal was to reorganise the NSC's organisational structure (Burke 2017). One of the first policy issues undertaken by McMaster was to review American policy in Afghanistan. In particular, the number of troops was central to U.S. strategy and informed most of the discussions among the military leadership. While the Department of Defense estimated that there were up to 20 active terrorist groups in Afghanistan, the U.S. could count on only about 8,500 troops on the ground to deal with the burgeoning violence (Byman & Simon 2017). From the perspectives of the NSC, Pentagon, Department of State and the various intelligence agencies, the U.S. needed to increase the number of troops. However, Trump had consistently criticised America's involvement in Afghanistan and called for the withdrawal of American forces (Landler & Haberman 2017). As a candidate, he pledged to end America's nation-building endeavours being actively pursued in the Middle East, condemning them for squandering the nation's resources (Nakamura & Philip 2017).

In order to balance the military's recommendations with the president's preferences, by late March 2017, McMaster had developed what became known as the 4Rs strategy (reinforce, realign, reconcile and regionalise). The main goal

of the NCS's proposal was to consolidate the capacity and legitimacy of the Afghan government and involve other regional actors to help create the political stability necessary to confront the Taliban and other terrorist groups and establish a sustainable political settlement to end the conflict. As the details of the plan were refined, by May the NSC developed a proposal for deploying between 3,000-5,000 U.S. troops to Afghanistan (Idem). The recommendation coincided with the views of the military leadership in Afghanistan which in February had told members of Congress that the situation was at a 'stalemate' and that the U.S. was lacking a 'few thousand' troops (Gordon 2017a).

Members of the administration expected a decision to be made by May 25 when the U.S. would meet with its allies in the NATO summit hosted in Brussels. However, only after an attack killed over 150 people in Kabul, revealing the deteriorating security situation in the country, did Trump authorise Secretary of Defense James Mattis to determine the troop levels needed in Afghanistan, allowing him to deploy up to 4,000 additional troops (Landler & Haberman 2017). While Mattis had the authority to increase the number of U.S. forces, he wanted any decision to be framed within a broader strategic framework for the region, promising the Senate Armed Services Committee that the administration would develop a new strategy for Afghanistan by the early months of summer (Gordon 2017b).

The strategy review initiated in June 2017 revealed deep divisions within the administration and publicly showcased the political machinations employed by the different factions within it to try to influence the president's final decision. The national security team composed of McMaster, Mattis and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson embodied the establishment's 'realist internationalist' outlook which argued for the continuation of American leadership of the liberal international order (Pfiffner 2018). They sought to maintain America's commitment to international allies and to the multilateral organisations and institutions it created throughout the post-war era, such as NATO. McMaster wanted to 'depoliticize' the deliberation process and conduct the strategy review using the formal bureaucratic structures available to the NSC (Jaffe & Rucker 2017). His overarching goal was to develop a strategy that allowed the U.S. to bolster its position in Afghanistan and create a situation wherein it could negotiate a settlement with the Taliban from a position of strength.

The 'establishment' proposal was countered by the 'nationalist' faction within the White House and which was led by White House Chief Strategist and Senior Counsellor to the President, Steve Bannon. For Bannon and his acolytes, the main goal was to withdraw American military forces from Afghanistan without the administration appearing to lose face by capitulating to the Taliban. In order to overcome this conundrum, Bannon advocated for the privatisation of

the war. More precisely, Bannon and Jarred Kushner proposed using private military contractors to fill the void left by removing U.S. troops (Landler, Schmitt & Gordon 2017). The nationalist faction roused Trump's most basic sentiments regarding America's international role. As a result, he rejected the NSC proposal to send thousands of additional troops to Afghanistan, declaring that the U.S. was 'losing' and criticising his national security team and the military for continuously promoting failed strategies (Landler & Haberman 2017).

The appointment of General John Kelly as the Chief of Staff in July 2017 bolstered the national security team's objectives. In seeking to instil a more formal decision-making process within the White House, Kelly instituted several new procedures in order to discipline the information flow to the president (Haberman, Thrush & Baker 2017). Therefore, not only was Bannon increasingly excluded from decision-making, but Kelly also pushed the deliberation process by gathering the national security team for a decisive meeting at Camp David on 18 August.

Three options had been developed for Afghanistan: 1) withdrawal of U.S. forces, 2), shift to a covert counterterrorism strategy led by the CIA or 3) an increase in the number of U.S. troops (Landler & Haberman 2017). At Camp David, the national security team argued that withdrawing U.S. forces would lead to the collapse of the Afghan government and the consolidation of the Taliban and other terrorist groups. Mattis compared the situation to Iraq in which Obama's decision to withdraw American forces had created a vacuum that allowed ISIS to form and grow. The Director of the CIA, Mike Pompeo, also informed the president that his agency was not ready to take responsibility for a full-fledged counterterrorism campaign. Pompeo argued that the CIA would take nearly two years to develop the capacity to successfully manage such a mission. Accordingly, McMaster made the case for continuing the existing strategy and augmenting the number of U.S. troops by approximately 4,000.

Trump disagreed with his advisors' assessments, doubting that the U.S. could win in Afghanistan and reiterating his criticism of the existing strategy. However, despite his inclination to blame the military for the situation and his drive to extract America from Afghanistan, Trump did not want to be perceived as being responsible for creating a potential security vacuum in the region that would strengthen America's enemies. Furthermore, Mattis' analogy with Obama's withdrawal from Iraq provided Trump with an opportunity to try to establish a stark contrast in leadership with that of his predecessor (Woodward 2018). Reluctantly, Trump approved the strategy developed by the NSC and which embodied McMaster's 4Rs, adding 4,000 additional U.S. troops to the existing 8,500 servicemen in Afghanistan. In announcing the new strategy, Trump defined victory as 'attacking our enemies, obliterating ISIS, crushing al Qaeda,

preventing the Taliban from taking over Afghanistan, and stopping mass terror attacks against America before they emerge' (The White House 2017a). During his address, Trump admitted that his original instinct was to withdraw American forces but emphasised that his role as president compelled him to consider America's broader strategic interests.

Responding to Syria's chemical weapons attacks

As the administration struggled with the decision to increase troop deployments to Afghanistan, the situation in Syria escalated rapidly when news broke of the 4 April 2017 chemical weapons attack on Khan Sheikhoun. Images of the dead, men, women and children, underscored the failure of the ceasefire brokered by Russia and Turkey from late 2016, and struck a chord with President Trump. Informed of the attack during his presidential daily briefing, Trump tasked the Secretary of Defense and Pentagon with drafting retaliatory military options (Hartmann & Kirby 2017). The president consulted with his top national security advisors, throughout the day speaking with secretaries Mattis and Tillerson, and General Joseph Dunford (Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff) who agreed on the need to carry out airstrikes to punish the Syrian regime (Dawsey 2017).

The first public statement came from Press Secretary Sean Spicer, who on 4 April laid the blame on Assad and former President Obama (Merica, Scott & Starr 2017). Trump made a similar allusion in his first public statements, criticising Obama for not enforcing his 'red line' threat and resolving the crisis in Syria. Asked by a reporter if the recent chemical attack had crossed a red line, Trump responded that 'It crossed a lot of lines for me. When you kill innocent children, innocent babies – babies, little babies – with a chemical gas that is so lethal – people were shocked to hear what gas it was – that crosses many, many lines, beyond a red line. Many, many lines' (The White House 2017c).

The following day, President Trump and the senior members of the NSC met and were presented with four courses of action (Hersh 2017). The first, to continue business-as-usual and do nothing to address the chemical attacks, was dismissed by all present at the meeting as inconceivable. Just like Obama, Trump had drawn his own 'red line(s)' and any sign of lassitude would open his administration to the same criticism he levelled at Obama. The remaining options focused on a range of military strikes, escalating from a strike on a Syrian airfield to decapitating the Assad regime by bombing his command-and-control network, personal residence and bunkers in Damascus (Woodward 2018). After several hours of discussion, Trump directed his advisors to pursue the more modest military options.

Trump was unenthusiastic about having to carry out military strikes in Syria and was certainly not interested in any attempt to decapitate the Assad regime.

What did motivate him was the desire to appear decisive and assertive. Shortly after the Khan Sheikhoun attack, Trump pointed out to several friends and associates that, after backing down from the military strikes in Syria, Obama had come across as 'weak, just so, so weak' (Trump cited in Dawsey 2017). According to an aide present at the meeting, Trump 'was looking for something aggressive but "proportionate" that would be sufficient to send a signal – but not so large as to risk escalating the conflict' (Shear & Gordon 2017). On 6 April, Trump convened a 'decision meeting' with his national security team at Mar-a-Lago for a final round of deliberations and to inform them of his decision to authorise the strike (Gordon, Cooper & Shear 2017; Pettypiece et al. 2017).

At 7:40pm EDT, the *USS Porter* and *USS Ross* fired 59 Tomahawk missiles striking Syria's al-Shayrat airfield and destroying its hardened aircraft shelters, aircraft, radar equipment, fuel depots, ammunition supply bunkers and logistical storage (Hartmann & Kirby 2017). While in 2013 Trump claimed that Obama required Congressional approval in order to carry out a military strike against Syria, in this instance the administration made 'a conscious decision not to seek permission from Congress' (Dawsey 2017). Trump claimed the military strikes were essential to the nation's vital national security interest in the war powers letter he submitted to Congress on 8 April (The White House 2017b).

The Trump administration received acclaim for the missile strikes, both at home and among allies (BBC 2017). Above all, the president's action provided an opportunity for the administration to show political resolve and dispel some of the criticism surrounding its perceived dysfunctional decision-making system. For Tillerson and McMaster in particular, the deliberation process leading to the strikes rebutted criticism of their managerial ineptitude in running their respective bureaucratic organisations and allowed them 'to show that they were wielding influence over critical national security decisions' (Landler 2017). The description of a quick and steadfast decision-making process also allowed Trump to differentiate himself from Obama's purported indecisiveness. Ultimately, the strikes provided him with the opportunity to change the prevalent narrative questioning his fitness for the presidency.

Despite the sense of accomplishment, the administration had to address the challenge posed by chemical weapons again the following year. On the evening of 7 April 2018, an attack on the rebel-held town of Douma killed some 70 people and injured over 500 more. Images of the victims, again including children, began to circulate on social media, while Syrian state media hurriedly blamed rebel groups for themselves deploying chemical weapons in the town to halt the advance of Syrian troops (Shaheen 2018). The State Department responded that the 'Assad regime and its backers must be held accountable, and any further attacks prevented immediately' (Hubbard 2017) and Trump (2018c) tweeted

'President Putin, Russia and Iran are responsible for backing Animal Assad. Big price . . . to pay.' The language employed in the statements indicated a forthcoming response and the military began developing strike options as the national security team considered how forcefully the U.S. would respond to Syria (Rucker et al. 2018). Trump was reportedly frustrated that the 2017 strikes had failed to deter Assad from using chemical weapons, and so he sought a quick and impactful intervention (Lucey & Colvin 2018). Meanwhile, advisors such as Mattis and Dunford recommended patience to analyse the available options and assess potential consequences and coordinate the response with allies (Crowley & Restuccia 2018).

Trump alternated between acceding to the more deliberative advisory process and Twitter outbursts with open threats. On 11 April Trump (2018b) tweeted, 'Russia vows to shoot down any and all missiles fired at Syria. Get ready Russia, because they will be coming, nice and new and "smart!".' The statement confounded U.S. military officials who were still assessing the source and type of chemicals used in the attack at Douma, as well as those developing the military options as they had not been informed of an official decision to intervene. Indeed, the final attack options, including targets, would not reach the president's desk until the day after the tweet (Rucker et al. 2018).

The military intervention was launched on 13 April and targeted sites associated with chemical weapons research and development, command and control, as well as weapons storage in Damascus and Homs (Crowley & Restuccia 2018; Rucker et al. 2018). In his address to the American people, Trump stated 'The purpose of our actions tonight is to establish a strong deterrent against the production, spread, and use of chemical weapons' (The White House 2018b). Indeed, the limited objective was made clear the next morning when the president declared 'Mission Accomplished!' (Trump 2018a) and Secretary Mattis later affirmed that when he described the intervention as a 'one-time shot' (Crowley & Restuccia 2018).

Pulling back from striking Iran

After withdrawing the U.S. from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), Trump embraced the policy of 'maximum pressure' and authorised the imposition of a host of economic sanctions on the Iranian regime and the mobilisation of American military resources in the region (Bergman, R. & Mazzetti 2019). However, over the following months, the administration continued to exhibit signs of disorder by conveying conflicting signals. For example, while throughout the spring of 2018, Trump repeatedly threatened Tehran, in late July, he took many of his advisors by surprise by announcing that he was prepared to meet with Iranian leaders without any preconditions.

Over the subsequent months, both sides embarked on a tit-for-tat policy of confrontation. A sense of crisis erupted when an American RQ-4 Global Hawk unmanned surveillance drone was shot down over the Strait of Hormuz on 19 June. In contrast to past incidents, Iran claimed responsibility for downing the drone, justifying its actions by claiming that drone had breached its airspace. The Commander in Chief of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, Hossein Salami, argued that by violating Iran's borders, the U.S. had crossed 'our red line' and, therefore, Tehran had provided an unequivocal signal that it would resist American aggressions (Shear et al. 2019).

That morning, the APNSA, John Bolton, convened a meeting with the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Joseph Dunford, the Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, the acting Secretary of Defense, Patrick Shanahan, and his replacement Mark Esper. The national security team swiftly reached a general agreement in recommending that the U.S. respond to Iran's provocation with military action (Baker, Haberman & Gibbons-Neff 2019). The main issue under discussion was the level of military response. The Pentagon proposed sinking an Iranian missile boat that it was tracking in the Gulf of Oman. The military leadership believed that by warning Tehran of the imminent attack this option would avoid casualties and offer a proportionate response to the destruction of the American drone. Pompeo and Bolton wanted a more assertive response which implied striking a more 'comprehensive list' of targets inside Iran. However, the need for an expeditious response led the advisors to settle for a more limited set of targets made up of three missile batteries and radars inside Iran (Baker, Schmitt & Crowley 2019).

Subsequently, at 11:00am, the national security team reconvened to discuss the situation and present the military strike options to the president. The advisors recommended the limited military strike option agreed to in the previous meeting, arguing that the strike would result in about 150 Iranian casualties. General Dunford was more circumspect than his peers and emphasised the need for a proportionate response in order to avoid a spiralling of military escalation that might potentially endanger U.S. forces and allies in the region (Baker, Haberman & Gibbons-Neff 2019). While the president did not formally sign-off on the proposal, the advisors left the meeting convinced that he had approved the strikes and, therefore, began mobilising the military resources required to carry out the mission (Baker, Schmitt & Crowley 2019).

After the meeting, Trump confounded some of his advisors. Earlier that morning, Trump had tweeted that 'Iran made a very big mistake' (reproduced in Olorunnipa et al. 2019). However, in a post-conference briefing session with Canada's prime-minister, Justin Trudeau, Trump was sceptical and played down the situation. Despite Tehran having accepted responsibility for the attack,

Trump argued that, most likely, the incident was not an intentionally hostile act on the part of the Iranian regime, but rather the responsibility 'of somebody who was loose and stupid that did it' (Trump cited in Olorunnipa et al. 2019). This state of uncertainty continued as Trump convened his top advisors in the Oval Office that evening. The president was visibly concerned about the potential repercussions of the strikes, namely the number of possible casualties (Idem). Before the meeting began, Trump repeatedly recounted a story that General Jack Keane told the *Fox News* evening show of how the U.S. inadvertently shot down an Iranian commercial airliner in 1988. In the interview, Keane suggested that the downing of the U.S. drone might have also been a mistake. According to reports, several of the president's advisors believed that 'Keane's brief history lesson exacerbated Trump's pre-existing doubts about carrying out the strike' (Johnson 2019). In fact, in the preceding days, another *Fox News* host, Tucker Carlson, had also frequently spoken with the president, warning of the risks to his presidency and the prospects of his re-election if he involved the U.S. in another war in the Middle East (Baker, Schmitt & Crowley 2019).

Despite the president's concerns, his advisors once again made the case for military retaliation against Iran's actions. By this time, over 10,000 U.S. military personnel in the Middle East were already positioned, and carrier-based fighter planes and navy vessels were ready for launching retaliatory strikes (Idem). Nevertheless, Trump was fixated with the 150 potential Iranian casualties resulting from the strikes. The president highlighted that when the U.S. drone was downed, no Americans were killed. Therefore, with Pence, Pompeo and Bolton absent from the meeting, Trump latched on to the potential Iranian fatalities and decided to cancel the strikes (Olorunnipa et al. 2019).

Trump's decision caught many of his advisors off-guard. Pompeo and Bolton were particularly upset with the decision because they believed it would further embolden Iran's aggressive behaviour (Baker, Schmitt & Crowley 2019). The decision also fostered bipartisan criticism in Congress. For example, Liz Cheney (R-WY) called the failure to respond assertively to Iran a 'very serious mistake' and Adam Kinzinger (R-IL) said he was disappointed with the president's decision (Olorunnipa et al. 2019; Shear, Cooper & Schmitt 2019). However, Trump defended his decision based on its proportionality. After the meeting, the president tweeted 'We were cocked & loaded to retaliate last night on 3 different sights [sic] when I asked, how many will die. 150 people, sir, was the answer from a General. 10 minutes before the strike I stopped it' (reproduced in Diamond et al. 2019). The president reasoned that Americans would not equate the downing of a $130 million drone and the killing of 150 people the same way, conceding to his aides that 'the dollar figure would resonate less with U.S. voters than the potential casualties' (Bender & Lubold 2019). The president also publicly acknowledged

General Dunford's moderating influence, contrasting him to his other advisors' more bellicose views. In fact, throughout the day of the decision, Dunford had consistently made the case for a more restrained course of action, highlighting the risks of escalation and the danger to U.S. forces in the region if America's response was not proportionate (Baker, Haberman & Gibbons-Neff 2019).

Withdrawing U.S. troops from Syria

President Trump's penchant for policy-making by tweet persisted as the administration continued to address the challenges in Syria. In contrast to his predecessor, throughout the campaign Trump devalued the need to remove Assad, arguing that America's focus in Syria should be on defeating ISIS (Langley & Baker 2016). Trump was not interested in committing the U.S. to Syria's internal conflict any further. However, administration officials continued to push for greater American engagement in addressing the political situation in the country.

For instance, Mattis and Tillerson repeatedly made the case for the U.S. working towards a political settlement to the conflict and having a long-term 'stabilizing' role in Syria and the region (BBC 2018a; Worth 2018). While Trump had reluctantly sanctioned his national security team's plans for maintaining U.S. forces in Syria, he continued to publicly assure Americans that U.S. troops would be withdrawing from the country 'very soon' (BBC 2018b). After ordering the suspension of financial recovery assistance for Syria, on 3 April 2018, Trump met with the NSC and instructed his national security team to begin preparing for the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Syria. Mattis and Dunford argued that a precipitous withdrawal would allow for the resurgence of ISIS and reinforce Iran and Russia's standing in the region (David 2018; DeYoung & Harris 2018). Trump reluctantly conceded that more time was required but emphasised the need to begin preparations for extracting American forces.

Despite diverging public remarks from administration officials, throughout the following months, the national security team continued to develop and prepare retaliatory measures in the case that the Assad regime attacked the opposition forces in the Idlib province or employed chemical weapons again on its population (Bolton 2020). This reflected the belief among many of the president's national security advisors that the primary objective was to challenge Iran's growing regional assertiveness. With Tillerson gone and Mattis increasingly shunned by the president, Bolton and Pompeo embarked on a policy of imposing 'maximum pressure' on Tehran in an attempt to force the regime to modify its behaviour (Kube & Lee 2018; Seligman 2019). According to the new Secretary of State, the U.S. should leverage economic sanctions, military deterrence and domestic opposition in Tehran to force the change (Pompeo 2018).

As administration officials remained earnestly committed to a prolonged engagement in Syria, in December 2018, Trump brought the issue of withdrawal to the fore once more. Over the preceding months Trump and the President of Turkey, Recep Erdogan, had been sparring over a series of diplomatic issues which led to the imposition of sanctions between the two countries (Bolton 2020). The quarrel was attenuated as Trump and Erdogan held a bilateral meeting at the Buenos Aires G20. In a phone call between the two leaders on 14 December, Erdogan reiterated his concern about the U.S. support for Kurdish forces operating near the Turkish border (Seligman & Hirsh 2018). During the call, Erdogan indicated that Turkey wanted to eliminate the threat of both the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and ISIS. Trump seized on the offer and told him he was ready to withdraw American troops from Syria if Turkey would deal with ISIS. He then told the APNSA to develop a plan for the extraction of American forces, entrusting Turkey to continue the fight against ISIS (Bolton 2020).

Following the call, Bolton, Mattis and Pompeo met with the president in the White House and tried to convince him to not hastily withdraw U.S. forces. To no avail, the advisors argued that the decision would provide an opportunity for ISIS to regenerate itself and that it would bolster Iran's position in the region (Bergen 2019). On 18 December, Bolton, Mattis, Pompeo, Dunford, Gina Haspel (Director of the CIA) and Dan Coats (Director of National Intelligence), among others, met in the Pentagon to discuss the situation and the options available to best comply with the president's demands. Dunford informed them that it would take approximately four months to remove U.S. troops from Syria (Bolton 2020). However, Trump gave his advisors no time to prepare for the roll out of the decision and the following morning, 19 December, Trump tweeted 'We have defeated ISIS in Syria, my only reason for being there during the Trump presidency' (reproduced in Seligman & Hirsh 2018) and, later that day, promised to bring U.S. troop home (reproduced in Landler, Cooper & Schmitt 2018). The president had once again made a major policy announcement without warning his national security team and denying them time to plan the response. This was evident when the White House and the Pentagon struggled to explain how the withdrawal would proceed. The Press Secretary issued a statement claiming that the withdrawal marked the beginning of the 'next phase' with ISIS, while the Pentagon limited itself to stating that it would begin removing U.S. forces from Syria, but without providing any details or a timetable (Borger & Chulov 2018).

Mattis made one last attempt to persuade the president to postpone the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Syria, arguing that leaving would create an opportunity for threats to resurface in the future and emphasising how the Obama administration had made the same mistake. He also underscored that the Kurds were shouldering the brunt of the fighting and that allies and international

organisations were also contributing to the mission. When Trump refused to budge, Mattis resigned, telling the president that 'you have the right to a Secretary of Defense whose views are better aligned with yours on these and other subjects' (Woodward 2020).

Trump was, however, persuaded to sign off on a slower withdrawal during a meeting with military officials during a visit to Al Asad Air Base in Iraq, on 26 December. By assuring that U.S. forces could liquidate the ISIS caliphate while they were withdrawing and manage any resurgent problems from bases in Iraq, the commander of the Combined Joint Task Force Operation Inherent Resolve, Lieutenant General Paul LaCamera, was able to convince the president to allow for up to four weeks to complete the mission (Bolton 2020). Afterwards, in remarks to American troops, Trump stated, 'There will be a strong, deliberate, and orderly withdrawal of U.S. forces from Syria – very deliberate, very orderly – while maintaining the U.S. presence in Iraq to prevent an ISIS resurgence and to protect U.S. interests, and also to always watch very closely over any potential reformation of ISIS and also to watch over Iran' (The White House 2018a).

Despite Trump's rhetoric, the withdrawal proceeded at a gradual pace (Seligman 2019). With Erdogan threatening to invade Northern Syria throughout the summer, Trump again focused his attention on Syria. After a new phone call with his Turkish counterpart on 6 October, Trump ordered the withdrawal of the remaining U.S. troops from Syria. The decision again blindsided many administration officials and generated fierce criticism for the abandonment of America's Kurdish allies (Barnes & Schmitt 2019).

Killing general Qasem Suleimani
The tensions between the U.S. and Iran continued to simmer throughout the second half of 2019. As Iran progressively extricated itself from the provisions of the JCPOA and continued to increase the country's uranium enrichment process, the Trump administration persisted in ratcheting up its policy of maximum pressure. When protests led to clashes with security forces in Iran (Fassihi & Gladstone 2019), officials in the Trump administration felt that their policy of stepping-up economic pressure against the regime in Tehran was vindicated (Sanger 2019).

In the meantime, Iranian-backed militias continued their campaign of rocket attacks on Iraqi bases housing American troops. One such group was the Shia paramilitary group Kata'ib Hezbollah which had strong connections to the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps which supplied it with weapons and other lethal aid. Over the year, the group had carried out several rocket attacks as a way to keep the pressure on the U.S. (Baker et al. 2020). However, the situation escalated on 27 December 2019, when Kata'ib Hezbollah launched about 30 rockets

at the Iraqi K1 military base in Kirkuk, killing an Iraqi-American civilian interpreter and wounding three U.S. soldiers and two Iraqi police officers (Bender et al. 2020; Ryan et al. 2020).

The following day, the Pentagon briefed the president on the situation and presented a host of possible military options, including strikes against Iranian-backed militias in Iraq or on Iranian ships or missile facilities. According to reports, military officials 'also tacked on the choice of targeting the commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards' Quds Force, General Qasem Suleimani, mainly to make other options seem reasonable' (Cooper et al. 2020). Over the weekend, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, Secretary of Defense Mark Esper and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley, among others, travelled to Mar-a-Lago to discuss the administration's best course of action. Trump ultimately rejected the possibility of killing Suleimani and approved retaliatory strikes on a host of militia targets. As a result, on 29 December the U.S. Air Force carried out airstrikes on several militia sites on the Iraq-Syria border, killing over 25 members of Kata'ib Hezbollah and injuring over 50 others (Ryan et al. 2020). As a response, two days later, thousands of pro-Iranian militia members and their supporters besieged and stormed the American embassy in Baghdad. The U.S. military quickly dispatched over 100 marines from Kuwait who were able to disperse the protesters and contain the situation without any American casualties (Baker et al. 2020).

Watching the events in Baghdad play out on television in Washington, Trump and his advisors feared that the administration would face a situation akin to or worse than the attack against Americans in Benghazi, Libya (Cooper et al. 2020). When four Americans, including the U.S. Ambassador to Libya, Christopher Stevens, were killed in 2012, Trump argued that it was a bigger scandal than Watergate, tweeting, 'Don't let Obama get away with allowing Americans to die. Kick him out of office tomorrow' (reproduced in Usborne 2017). This time around, Trump again took to Twitter warning: 'Iran will be held fully responsible for lives lost, or damage incurred, at any of our facilities. They will pay a very BIG PRICE! This is not a Warning, it is a Threat. Happy New Year!' (reproduced in Harding & Borger 2019). The president also assailed Iraqi authorities for failing to control the situation and protect the U.S. embassy.

As events were unfolding, the APNSA, Robert O'Brien, circulated a top-secret memo among members of the administration which suggested a score of potential targets for American retaliatory action, including targeting high profile Iranian officials such as General Suleimani and Abdul Reza Shahlai, a commander of Iran's elite Quds Force in Yemen (Baker et al. 2020). Several U.S. officials held Suleimani responsible for the death of hundreds of American troops in the region (Crowley, Hassan & Schmitt 2020). However, Presidents George W. Bush

and Barack Obama had avoided striking Suleimani and other high-level Iranian officials, believing that killing them was too provocative and the costs of killing them outweighed the benefits.

Despite the concerns of his predecessors, President Trump had been contemplating killing Suleimani for several months. He first raised the prospect of killing the general in the spring of 2017 after Iranian-backed Yemeni rebels attacked Riyadh on the eve of Trump's first visit to Saudi Arabia. As tensions with Iran escalated, Trump would periodically bring up the issue (Sonne, Jaffe & Dawsey 2020). In May 2019, Bolton requested that the U.S. military and intelligence agencies revise their options for deterring Iran's increased belligerency. As a result, the agency review put forward the option of the targeting members of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps and intensified their surveillance of Suleimani.

Notwithstanding the planning, officials in the Pentagon were still reluctant to endorse the killing of Suleimani, questioning the benefits and propriety of striking the Iranian official (Idem; Bender 2020). However, the president's top advisors converged in their assessment that eliminating Suleimani was the best course of action. In particular, Vice President Pence and Secretary Pompeo were the most vocal supporters of this course of action (Cooper 2020). Pompeo was the only remaining member of Trump's initial national security team and consistently promoted a more belligerent policy toward Iran. Accordingly, after the attack on the U.S. embassy, the Secretary of State spurred the president to authorise the killing of the Iranian general (Wong & Jakes 2020). Haspel bolstered Pompeo's position, referencing evidence that Suleimani was planning attacks on several American resources in the region and arguing that the consequences of not acting were more dangerous than taking decisive measures (Baker et al. 2020).

The opportunity to act came when reports indicated that Suleimani would visit Baghdad on Friday, 3 January 2020. Trump met with his national security team at Mar-a-Lago on 1 and 2 January to discuss the prospect of killing Suleimani and assess the possible repercussions. Several additional options were discussed, such as a new round of military strikes on Iranian-backed militias in Iraq or on Iranian ships and missile batteries. However, Trump had grown weary of officials insistently warning him throughout his presidency that taking bold actions would ultimately harm U.S. security (Schmitt et al. 2020). More significantly, several of Trump's advisors suggested that the president's reluctance to act assertively in the past had emboldened Iranian leadership. For some, the decision to cancel the strikes on Iran after the downing of an American drone was portrayed as a sign of hesitancy and weakness (Ryan et al. 2020). The appearance of weakness was one of Trump's greatest fears. Killing Suleimani would offer

him the opportunity to again establish a clear contrast with his predecessor. As the president would publicly admit a few days later, 'it was going to be another Benghazi, had they broken through the final panels of glass. Had they gotten through, we would have had either hundreds of dead people or hundreds of hostages,' adding that 'We did it exactly the opposite of Benghazi, where they got there so late' (Trump cited in Boyer 2020).

Trump officially authorised the operation to kill Suleimani on Thursday evening (Schmitt et al. 2020). Several military officials were taken aback by the president's decision. While they had provided him with the option, they considered it to be the most extreme choice and did not believe he would act on it. In particular, they were concerned with the safety of U.S. troops in the region in the eventuality of an Iranian reprisal, as well as the precedent set by the U.S. in sanctioning the assassination of foreign government officials (Cooper et al. 2020; Walt 2020). The decision was reached swiftly since the deliberation process was limited to a handful of the president's closest advisors – i.e., Vice President Pence, Secretary of State Pompeo, Defense Secretary Esper, Gina Haspel (CIA Director), Robert O'Brien (APNSA), Mick Mulvaney (Chief of Staff) and Eric Ueland (Director of the Office of Legislative Affairs) (Schmitt et al. 2020). The multiple meetings and conference calls were organised and coordinated through the vice president's office, as Pence served as the point man in the deliberation process, even though he was not at the president's Mar-a-Lago resort (Cooper et al. 2020). The decision was also carried out quickly and diligently since it departed from the traditional channels of planning and implementation, excluding consultation with some high-level officials, lower-level staffers in the military, members of Congress and key American allies (Bender et al. 2020).

Accordingly, on 3 January 2020, as Suleimani's two car convoy left Baghdad Airport, an American MQ-9 Reaper drone carried out the missile strike, killing the general and nine other associates (Baker et al. 2020). The administration confirmed the attack at 9:46 pm in a short press release as Trump denounced Suleimani as 'the number-one terrorist anywhere in the world' and justified his decision by claiming that the general 'was plotting imminent and sinister attacks on American diplomats and military personnel' (The White House 2020). Over the following days, administration officials echoed the president's justification that there were imminent attacks on American interests throughout the region (Ryan 2020).

While the administration's explanations experienced increasing domestic and international scrutiny and the clash between the U.S. and Iran festered, the episode came to reveal an increasingly confident president, who was willing to make bold decisions, despite the reluctance of many of his military advisors. Moreover, contrary to deliberations in the past where the presidents' advisors

clashed and diverged on the appropriate course of action, the national security team was now wholly aligned with Trump's worldview and decision. By this point in his presidency, Trump had cycled through civilian advisors to the extent that few remaining would challenge his perspective, and he no longer exhibited his earlier deference to military officials. The decision to kill Suleimani further continued the trend in the Trump administration for carrying out expeditious deliberation processes and increasingly to circumvent many of the formal structures and process of decision-making.

Conclusion

Our analysis of Trump's Middle East policy confirms the main tenets of the evolution model of presidential policy-making which claims that, over time, the 'participation in the decision-making process narrows, more ad hoc or informal processes are created, and the full interagency process is bypassed or streamlined on a regular basis' (Newmann 2015). This evolution reflects the assumption that presidents learn on the job and change their organisational structures and processes to assure they implement the best decisions (cf. Levy 1994). However, Trump did not learn in office in the sense of adjusting and adopting processes that assured he received the information and advice that was needed to make the best possible decisions. Rather, as the structured-focus comparison of the five cases illustrates, over time, the president increasingly bypassed traditional structures and implemented ad hoc processes to personalise foreign policy formulation. The disregard for well-defined structures and processes stemmed from the personalisation of decision-making on Trump himself and reflected the style that had characterised the management of his corporate enterprises. In other words, in the Trump world, he establishes the rules and makes the decisions.

His national security team initially tried to reign in his most basic impulses and establish formal processes for discussing and developing foreign policy. In particular, Kelly and McMaster sought to implement a more functional deliberation system by instituting several procedures for vetting the information coming to and from the president. Nevertheless, Trump increasingly thwarted the deliberation process by allowing advisors to circumvent these structures and processes, by actively seeking alternative sources of information (particularly from outside governmental institutions), and by announcing decisions without previously consulting with or informing his advisors. Sceptical of the advice of his national security team, the president increasingly sought information and policy options that confirmed his pre-existing beliefs or preferences. As frustration with his advisors grew and he became increasingly confident of his political instincts, Trump gradually replaced those individuals that challenged his views

and refused to enthusiastically embrace his agenda – leading to one of the highest turnover rates in the modern presidency (Tempas 2021).

Accordingly, over time, Trump implemented an advisory system that reflected his personal needs and expectations. By the end of his term, Trump had a foreign policy team of more like-minded advisors who were in sync with his worldview and less willing to push back or challenge his beliefs and judgement. Over the years, he consolidated his unconventional style of management at the head of the executive branch of government, centralising decision-making, forestalling orderly deliberation processes, and shattering institutional conventions and norms (da Vinha & Dutton 2021). Even after losing his re-election, Trump continued to manage the White House the same way he managed his corporate enterprises. This is patent in his decision to withdraw American forces from Afghanistan at the end of 2020, which precluded a thorough deliberation process and led Trump to oust Defense Secretary Mark Esper after he questioned the president's decision (Lamothe et al. 2020).

Ultimately, Trump continued the decades-long trend of the personalisation of foreign policy decision-making in the hands of the president. However, more than any of his recent predecessors, Trump tried to fundamentally change the role and the office of the president of the U.S. (Baker 2017). Since the beginning of his presidency, Trump, with the help of many of his advisors, was bent on tearing down the government apparatus (Calabresi 2017). Robert Denton, Jr. (1983: 372) long suggested that 'the best measure of a politician's greatness is his ability to create new roles for an established office.' In this respect, despite his aspirations, Trump failed to change these expectations. In fact, several of his former national security advisors are unrelenting in their criticism of Trump's leadership. John Bolton argued that Trump was 'unfit for office' and lacked the 'competence to carry out the job' (Wagner 2020), while H. R. McMaster claimed that the president had repeatedly compromised American principles 'in pursuit of partisan advantage and personal gain' (Choi 2021). Even more disconcerting, James Mattis denounced Trump as a threat to the Constitution and John Kelly admitted that if given the chance, he would support invoking the 25th amendment to the Constitution in order to remove the president from office (Cole 2021; Goldberg 2021). Concern with the president's erratic decision-making led the Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi (D-CA), to speak with the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff regarding the safeguards in place to prevent the president from initiating a nuclear exchange or other military hostilities (Lamothe, Wagner & Sonne 2021). Trump's unorthodox style ultimately consummated his place in history as the only American president to have been impeached twice.

Trump's foreign policy decision-making not only defied conventional assumptions regarding presidential behaviour, but also raises serious concerns

about the future of U.S. foreign policy-making. As Preston (2020) argues, 'In the absence of leaders who have high needs for information and an openness to alternative views, many of the efforts suggested in the literature to address advisory group dysfunction so that it augments a leader's strengths and compensates for their weaknesses are likely to fail.' In the Trump administration, the president's disdain for comprehensive deliberation processes created an environment prone to dysfunction and manipulation. Several accounts have highlighted how many of Trump's advisors, having failed to persuade the president or been unwilling to challenge his views, sought to influence policy outcomes by concealing information, leaking material to the public, and delaying or simply ignoring the president's directives (da Vinha 2019). However, as John Bolton acknowledges, many of the attempts to constrain or circumvent Trump's actions early in his presidency only strengthened his conviction to follow his intuition. Rather than establish order, the attempts by the alleged 'adults in the room' to regulate the president's behaviour only 'fed Trump's already-suspicious mind-set, making it harder for those who came later to have legitimate policy exchanges with the President' (Bolton 2020). Moreover, several key administration officials, concerned about rousing Trump's ire, actively endeavoured to ward off any information and advice that did not conform to the president's expectations and beliefs (Schmitt, Sanger & Haberman 2019).

Constraints on presidential action have been waning for decades and Trump merely represents the culmination of a long process of unconstrained executive power (Goldgeier & Saunders 2018). The increasingly polarised context of American politics favours an ever more assertive president. The dangers inherent in this trend were patently manifested in the Trump's Middle East policy. With that said, we are not making a judgement on the policies per se – their consequences can only be properly assessed with historical hindsight. Rather, we argue that positive outcomes may well be attributable to serendipity, since policies were overwhelmingly formulated outside the framework of an orderly deliberation process which guaranteed the necessary airing and consideration of the numerous options and alternatives. Therefore, it is our hope that we can learn from the Trump presidency and seriously contemplate how we can mitigate, if not reverse, what Robert Dahl (1990) designated as the 'pseudodemocratization of the presidency.'

<div style="text-align:center">∼</div>

Luis da Vinha is a Lecturer and Coordinator of the Master in International Relations at Flinders University. His research has been published with Routledge, Palgrave Macmillan, Presidential Studies Quarterly, Comparative Strategy,

Journal of Policy History, European Journal of Geography, Portuguese Journal of Political Science, and the Brown Journal of World Affairs, among others. Luis is also the author of Geographic Mental Maps and Foreign Policy Change and Three Approaches to Presidential Foreign Policy-Making in the Twenty-First Century (co-authored with Anthony Dutton).

Anthony Dutton is a Professor of History at Valley City State University, in North Dakota, USA. He chairs the Social Science Department and teaches courses in U.S. social and political history as well as North American history and relations. A former VCSU Faculty Association president and appointee to North Dakota University System taskforces for strategic planning and for faculty benefits, Dutton was the 2014 recipient of VCSU's Teacher of the Year. Anthony co-authored Three Approaches to Presidential Policy-Making in the Twenty-First Century with Luis da Vinha.

References

Baker, P. (2017): For Trump, a Year of Reinventing the Presidency. *The New York Times*, 31 December.

Baker, P., Haberman, M. & Gibbons-Neff, T. (2019): Urged to Launch an Attack, Trump Listened to the Skeptics Who Said It Would Be a Costly Mistake. *The New York Times*, 21 June.

Baker, P., Bergman, R., Kirkpatrick, D., Barnes, J. & Rubin, A. (2020): Seven Days in January: How Trump Pushed U.S. and Iran to the Brink of War. *The New York Times*, 13 January.

Baker, P., Schmitt, E. & Crowley, M. (2019): An Abrupt Move That Stunned Aides: Inside Trump's Aborted Attack on Iran. *The New York Times*, 21 September.

Barnes, J. & Schmitt, E. (2019): Trump Orders Withdrawal of U.S. Troops from Northern Syria. *The New York Times*, 16 October.

BBC (2017): Syria War: World Reaction to US Missile Attack. *BBC News*, April, <accessed online: https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-39526089>.

BBC (2018a): U.S. Plans Open-Ended Military Presence in Syria. *BBC News*, 18 January, <accessed online: https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-42731222>.

BBC (2018b): Syria War: Trump "Persuaded Not to Pull Out Immediately." *BBC News*, 2 April, <accessed online: https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-43644633>.

Bender, M., Gordon, M., Lubold, G. & Strobel, W. (2020): Trump's New National Security Team Made Fast Work of Iran Strike. *The Wall Street Journal*, 9 January.

Bender, M. & Lubold, G. (2019): Trump Bucked National-Security Aides on Proposed Iran Attack. *The Wall Street Journal*, 23 June.

Bergen, P. (2019): *Trump and His Generals: The Cost of Chaos*. New York: Penguin Press.

Bergman, R. & Mazzetti, M. (2019): The Secret History of the Push to Strike Iran. *The New York Times Magazine*, 6 September, <accessed online: https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/04/magazine/iran-strike-israel-america.html>.

Blake, A. (2016): 78 Republican Politicians, Donors and Officials Who Are Supporting Hillary Clinton. *The Washington Post*, 8 November.

Bolton, J. (2020): *The Room Where It Happened: A White House Memoir*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Borger, J. & Chulov, M. (2018): Trump Shocks Allies and Advisers with Plan to Pull U.S. Troops Out of Syria. *The Guardian*, 20 December.

Boyer, D. (2020): 'Opposite of Benghazi': Obama's Weak Response Motivated Trump's Iran Strike. *The Washington Times*, 12 January.

Burke, J. (2009): Organizational Structure and Presidential Decision Making. In: Edwards III, G. & Howell, W. (eds.): *The Oxford Handbook of the American Presidency*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 501-527.

Burke, J. (2017): The Trump Transition, Early Presidency, and National Security Organization. *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 47(3), 574-596.

Byman, D. & Simon, S. (2017): Trump's Surge in Afghanistan: Why We Can't Seem to End the War. *Foreign Affairs*, <accessed online: https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2017-09-18/trumps-surge-afghanistan>.

Calabresi, M. (2017): Inside Donald Trump's War Against the State. *TIME Magazine,* 189(10), 26-31.

Caldwell, L. (2016): These Republican Leaders Say Trump Should Not Be President. *NBC News*, 9 October, <accessed online: https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2016-election/donald-trump-widely-condemned-republican-leaders-legislators-n662446>.

Choi, J. (2021): McMaster: Trump 'Compromised Our Principles' for 'Personal Gain'. *The Hill*, 7 January, <accessed online: https://thehill.com/homenews/administration/533211-mcmaster-trump-compromised-our-principles-for-personal-gain>.

Cole, D. (2021): Trump's ex-White House Chief of Staff John Kelly Supports Using 25th Amendment to Remove the President. *CNN Politics*, 8 January, <accessed online: https://edition.cnn.com/2021/01/07/politics/john-kelly-trump-25th-amendment-capitol-riot-cnntv/index.html>.

Coppins, M. (2017): How Republicans Got Trump Catastrophically Wrong. *The Atlantic*, 11 October, <accessed online: https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/10/how-republicans-got-trump-catastrophically-wrong/542568/>.

Cooper, H., Schmitt, E., Haberman, M. & Callimachi, R. (2020): As Tensions with Iran Escalated, Trump Opted for Most Extreme Measure. *The New York Times*, 4 January.

Crowley, M., Hassan, F. & Schmitt, E. (2020): U.S. Strike in Iraq Kills Suleimani, Commander of Iranian Forces. *The New York Times*, 2 January.

Crowley, M. & Restuccia, A. (2018): Trump Strikes Syria. *POLITICO*, 13 April, <accessed online: https://www.politico.com/story/2018/04/13/trump-syria-strikes-523051>.

da Vinha, L. (2016): Structures, Processes, and Communication in the Transformation of the Carter Administration's Foreign Policy. *Journal of Policy History*, 28(4), 624-653.

da Vinha, L. (2019): Competition, Conflict, and Conformity: Foreign Policy-Making in the First Year of the Trump Presidency. *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 49(2), 280-309.

da Vinha, L. & Dutton, A. (2021): *Three Approaches to Presidential Foreign Policy-Making in the Twenty First Century: The Executive, the Magistrate, and the Maverick*. New York: Peter Lang.

Dahl, R. (1990): Myth of the Presidential Mandate. *Political Science Quarterly*, 105(3), 355-372.

Davis, J. (2018): Trump Drops Push for Immediate Withdrawal of Troops from Syria. *The New York Times*, 4 April.

Dawsey, J. (2017): Inside Trump's Three Days of Debate on Syria. *POLITICO*, 7 April, <accessed online: https://www.politico.com/story/2017/04/trump-syria-strikes-debate-237025>.

DeYoung, K. & Harris, S. (2018): Trump Instructs Military to Begin Planning for Withdrawal from Syria. *The Washington Post*, 4 April.

Denton, Jr., R. (1983): On "Becoming" President of the United States: The Interaction of the Office with the Office Holder. *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 13(3), 367-382.

Diamond, J., Starr, B., Gangel, J. & Sullivan, K. (2019): Trump Says U.S. was "Cocked and Loaded" to Strike Iran Before He Pulled Back. *CNN Politics*, 21 June, <accessed online: https://edition.cnn.com/2019/06/21/politics/trump-military-strikes-iran/index.html>.

Fassihi, F. & Gladstone, R. (2019): With Brutal Crackdown, Iran Is Convulsed by Worst Unrest in 40 Years. *The New York Times*, 3 December.

George, A. (1981): *Presidential Decisionmaking in Foreign Policy: The Effective Use of Information and Advice*. Boulder: Westview Press.

George, A. (2019): Case Studies and Theory Development: The Method of Structured, Focused Comparison. In: Caldwell, D. (ed.): *Alexander L. George: A Pioneer in Political and Social Sciences*. Cham: Springer, 191-214.

Goldberg, J. (2020): James Mattis Denounces President Trump, Describes Him as a Threat to the Constitution. *The Atlantic*, 4 June, <accessed online: https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2020/06/james-mattis-denounces-trump-protests-militarization/612640/>.

Goldgeier. J. & Saunders, E. (2018): The Unconstrained Presidency: Checks and Balances Eroded Long Before Trump. *Foreign Affairs*, 97(5), 144-156.

Gordon, M. (2017a): Trump Gives Mattis Authority to Send More Troops to Afghanistan. *The New York Times*, 13 June.

Gordon, M. (2017b): Trump Advisers Call for More Troops to Break Afghan Deadlock. *The New York Times*, 8 May.

Gordon, M., Cooper, H. & Shear, M. (2017): Dozens of Missiles Hit Air Base in Syria. *The New York Times*, 6 April.

Haberman, M., Thrush, G. & Baker, P. (2017): Inside Trump's Hour-By-Hour Battle for Self-Preservation. *The New York Times*, 9 December.

Harding, L. & Borger, J. (2019): Trump Threatens Iran Will Pay 'A Very Big Price' Over U.S. Embassy Protests in Baghdad. *The Guardian*, 31 December.

Hartmann, M. & Kirby, J. (2017): What We Know About the U.S. Military Strike Against Syria. *New York Magazine*, 7 April, <accessed online: http://nymag.com/intelligencer/2017/04/us-strikes-syria-response-chemical-attack.html>.

Hersh, S. (2017): Trump's Red Line. *Welt*, 25 June, <accessed online: https://www.welt.de/politik/ausland/article165905578/Trump-s-Red-Line.html>.

Hubbard, B. (2017): Trump's Strike on Syria Has All Sides Asking: What's Next? *The New York Times*, 7 April.

Jaffe, G. & Rucker, P. (2017): National Security Adviser Attempts to Reconcile Trump's Competing Impulses on Afghanistan. *The Washington Post*, 4 August.

Johnson, E. (2019): The Fox News General Who "Spooked" Trump Out of Attacking Iran. *POLITICO*, 2 July, <accessed online: https://www.politico.com/story/2019/07/02/keane-fox-news-iran-trump-1394148>.

Johnson, R. (1974): *Managing the White House: An Intimate Study of the Presidency*. New York: Harper & Row Publishers.

Kranish, M. & Fischer, M. (2017): *Trump Revealed: The Definitive Biography of the 45th President*. New York: Scribner.

Kruse, M. (2016): The Executive Mr. Trump. *POLITICO Magazine*, <accessed online: https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/07/2016-donald-trump-boss-employer-company-hired-fired-employees-workers-management-business-214020>.

Kube, C. & Lee, C. (2018): Mattis Is Out of the Loop and Trump Doesn't Listen to Him, Say Officials. *NBC News*, 25 June, <accessed online: https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/donald-trump/mattis-out-loop-trump-doesn-t-listen-him-say-officials-n885796>.

Lamothe, D., Wagner, J. & Sonne, P. (2021): Pelosi Says She Spoke to Top General About Ensuring Trump Doesn't Launch Nuclear Attack. *The Washington Post*, 9 January.

Lamothe, D., Ryan, M., DeYoung, K. & George, S. (2020): Defense Secretary Sent Classified Memo to White House about Afghanistan Before Trump Fired Him. *The Washington Post*, 15 November.

Landler, M. (2016): Trump's Hires Will Set Course of His Presidency. *The New York Times*, 12 November.

Landler, M. (2017): For 2 Advisers, Syria Strike Is a Chance to Step Out of the Shadows. *The New York Times*, 7 April.

Landler, M., Cooper, H. & Schmitt, E. (2018): Trump to Withdraw U.S. Forces from Syria, Declaring 'We Have Won Against ISIS'. *The New York Times*, 19 December.

Landler, M. & Haberman, M. (2017): Angry Trump Grilled His Generals About Troop Increase, Then Gave In. *The New York Times*, 21 August.

Landler, M., Schmitt, E. & Gordon, M. (2017): Trump Aides Recruited Businessmen to Devise Options for Afghanistan. *The New York Times*, 10 July.

Langley, M. & Baker, G. (2016): Donald Trump, in Exclusive Interview, Tells WSJ He Is Willing to Keep Parts of Obama Health Law. *The Wall Street Journal*, 11 November.

Levy, J. (1994): Learning and Foreign Policy: Sweeping a Conceptual Minefield. *International Organization*, 48(2), 279-312.

Lieberman, R., Mettler, S., Pepinsky, T., Roberts, K. & Valelly, R. (2019): The Trump Presidency and American Democracy: A Historical and Comparative Analysis. *Perspectives on Politics*, 17(2), 470-479.

Link, M. (2000): The Presidential Kaleidoscope: Advisory Networks in Action. In: Shapiro, R., Kumar, M. & Jacobs, L. (eds.): *Presidential Power: Forging the Presidency for the Twentieth Century*. New York: Columbia University Press, 235-261.

Lucey, C. & Colvin, J. (2018): Chaos, Consultation: Inside Trump's Decision to Strike Syria. *AP News*, 14 April, <accessed online: https://www.apnews.com/da953b7cbcae4eed929c47dbecb9a8a1>.

Luttwak, E. (2017): Enough Hysterics. Donald Trump's Foreign Policy Isn't Reckless or Radical. *Foreign Policy*, 17 November, <accessed online: https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/11/17/enough-hysterics-donald-trumps-foreign-policy-isnt-reckless-or-radical/>.

Mearsheimer, J. (2017): Donald Trump Should Embrace a Realist Foreign Policy. *The National Interest*, 27 November, <accessed online: https://nationalinterest.org/feature/donald-trump-should-embrace-realist-foreign-policy-18502>.

Menard, S. (2008): Introduction: Longitudinal Research Design and Analysis. In: Menard, S. (ed.): *Handbook of Longitudinal Research: Design, Measurement, and Analysis*. Burlington: Academic Press, 3-12.

Merica, D. Scott, E. & Starr, B. (2017): U.S. Officials: Early Belief Is that Syrian Attack Used Sarin Gas. *CNN*, 4 April, <accessed online: https://www.cnn.com/2017/04/04/politics/syria-chemical-attack-donald-trump-obama/index.html>.

Nakamura, D. & Philip, A. (2017): Trump Announces New Strategy for Afghanistan that Calls for a Troop Increase. *The Washington Post*, 21 August.

Newmann, W. (2004): The Structures of National Security Decision Making: Leadership, Institutions, and Politics in the Carter, Reagan, and G.H.W. Bush Years. *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 34(2), 272-306.

Newmann, W. (2015): Searching for the Right Balance? Managing Foreign Policy Decisions Under Eisenhower and Kennedy. *Congress & the Presidency,* 42(2), 119-146.

Olorunnipa, T., Dawsey, J., Demirjian, K. & Lamothe, D. (2019): 'I Stopped It': Inside Trump's Last-Minute Reversal on Striking Iran. *The Washington Post*, 22 June.

Pettypiece, S., Sink, J., Jacobs, J. & Olorunnipa, T. (2017): From Steak Dinner to Situation Room: Inside Trump's Syria Strike. *Bloomberg*, 7 April, <accessed online: https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-04-07/from-steak-dinner-to-situation-room-inside-trump-s-syria-strike>.

Pfiffner, J. (2018): Organizing the Trump Presidency. *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 48(1), 153-167.

Pompeo, M. (2018): Confronting Iran: The Trump Administration's Strategy. *Foreign Affairs*, 97(6): 60-70.

Porter, R. (1988): *Presidential Decision Making: The Economic Policy Board*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Preston, T. (2020): Advisory Groups and Crisis. In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*, <accessed online: https://oxfordre.com/politics/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228637-e-1533>.

Quinn, D., Wilkenfeld, J., Smarick, K. & Asal, V. (2006): Power Play: Mediation in Symmetric and Asymmetric International Crises. *International Interactions*, 32(4), 441-470.

Rucker, P., Ryan, M., Dawsey, J. & Gearan, A. (2018): "Big Price to Pay": Inside Trump's Decision to Bomb Syria. *The Washington Post*, 14 April.

Rudalevige, A. (2005): The Structure of Leadership: Presidents, Hierarchies, and Information Flow. *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 35(2), 333-360.

Rudalevige, A. (2009): 'Therefore, Get Wisdom': What Should the President Know, and How Can He Know It? *Governance: An International Journal of Policy, Administration, and Institutions*, 22(2), 177-187.

Ryan, M., Dawsey, J., Lamothe, D. & Hudson, J. (2020): How Trump Decided to Kill a Top Iranian General. *The Washington Post*, 4 January.

Sanger, D. (2019): Sanctions May Have Fueled Iran Protests, but Have Yet to Further U.S. Goals. *The New York Times*, 2 December.

Schmitt, E., Cooper, H., Gibbons-Neff, T., Haberman, M. & Baker, P. (2020): For Trump, a Risky Decision on Suleimani Is One Other Presidents Had Avoided. *The New York Times*, January.

Schmitt, E., Sanger, D. & Haberman, M. (2019): In Push for 2020 Election Security, Top Official Was Warned: Don't Tell Trump. *The New York Times*, 24 April.

Seligman, L. (2019): How Iran Hawks Botched Trump's Syria Withdrawal. *Foreign Policy*, 30 October, <accessed online: https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/10/30/iran-hawks-botched-trump-syria-policy-james-jeffrey-turkey/>.

Seligman, L. & Hirsh, M. (2018): Trump's 'Stunning' About-Face on Syria. *Foreign Policy*, 19 December, <accessed online: https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/12/19/trumps-stunning-about-face-on-syria-islamic-state-isis-trooops/>.

Shaheen, K. (2018): Dozens Killed in Suspected Chemical Attack on Syrian Rebel Enclave. *The Guardian*, 8 April.

Shear, M., Cooper, H, & Schmitt, E. (2019): Trump Says He Was "Cocked and Loaded" to Strike Iran, but Pulled Back. *The New York Times*, 21 June.

Shear, M. & Gordon, M. (2017): 63 Hours: From Chemical Attack to Trump's Strike in Syria. *The New York Times*, 7 April.

Shear, M., Schmitt, E., Crowley, M. & Haberman, M. (2019): Strikes on Iran Approved by Trump, Then Abruptly Pulled Back. *The New York Times*, 20 June.

Sonne, P., Jaffe, G. & Dawsey, J. (2020): Killing of Soleimani Reflects an Aggressive National Security Team Not Inclined to Curb Trump. *The Washington Post*, 13 January.

Tempas, K. (2021): Tracking Turnover in the Trump Administration. *Brookings*, <accessed online: https://www.brookings.edu/research/tracking-turnover-in-the-trump-administration/>.

The New York Times (2016): Why Donald Trump Should Not Be President. *The New York Times*, 25 September.

The Washington Post (2016): Donald Trump Is a Unique Threat to American Democracy. *The Washington Post*, 22 July.

The White House (2017a): Remarks by President Trump on the Strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia. *The White House*, 21 August, <accessed online: https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-strategy-afghanistan-south-asia/>.

The White House (2017b): A Letter from the President to the Speaker of the House of Representatives and the President Pro Tempore of the Senate. *The White House*, 8 April, <accessed online: https://www.whitehouse.gov/

briefings-statements/letter-president-speaker-house-representatives-president-pro-tempore-senate/>.

The White House (2017c): Remarks by President Trump and His Majesty King Abdullah II of Jordan in Joint Press Conference. *The White House*, 5 April, <accessed online: https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-majesty-king-abdullah-ii-jordan-joint-press-conference/>.

The White House (2018a): Remarks by President Trump to Troops at Al Asad Air Base, Al Anbar Province, Iraq. The White House, 26 December, <accessed online: https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-troops-al-asad-air-base-al-anbar-province-iraq/>.

The White House (2018b): Statement by President Trump on Syria. *The White House*, 13 April, <accessed online: https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-president-trump-syria/>.

The White House (2020): Remarks by President Trump on the Killing of Qasem Soleimani. *The White House*, 3 January, <accessed online: https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-killing-qasem-soleimani/>.

Trump, D. (2016): *Trump on Foreign Policy* [Transcript of Donald Trump's Speech hosted by The National Interest], 27 April, <accessed online: https://nationalinterest.org/feature/trump-foreign-policy-15960>.Trump, D. (2018a): *Twitter Post*, 14 April, <accessed online: https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/985130802668294144?lang=en>.

Trump, D. (2018b): *Twitter Post*, 11 April, <accessed online: https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/984022625440747520?lang=en>.

Trump, D. (2018c): *Twitter Post*, 8 April, <accessed online: https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/982966315467116544?lang=en>.

USA Today (2016): USA Today's Editorial Board: Trump Is "Unfit for the Presidency". *USA Today*, 30 September.

Usborne, D. (2017): Trump's Response to the Death of U.S. Special Forces in Niger Shows How Low He's Willing to Sink. *Independent*, 17 October, <accessed online: https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/trump-niger-special-forces-deaths-benghazi-response-compare-how-low-willing-sink-a8005521.html>.

Wagner, J. (2020): Trump 'Unfit for Office', Lacks 'Competence', Bolton Says in TV Interview. *The Washington Post*, 19 June.

Walcott, C. & Hult, K. (1995): *Governing the White House: From Hoover Through LBJ*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas.

Walt, S. (2020): Trump's Iran Policy is Brain-Dead. *Foreign Policy*, 3 January, <accessed online: https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/01/03/qassem-soleimani-trump-iran-policy-lacks-coherent-objectives-strategy/>.

Wong, E. & Jakes, L. (2020): Pompeo Upended Middle East by Pushing Trump to Kill Iranian General. *The New York Times*, 7 January.

Woodward, B. (2018): *Fear: Trump in the White House*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Woodward, B. (2020): *Rage*. New York: Simon & Schuster.Worth, R. (2018): Can Jim Mattis Hold the Line in Trump's 'War Cabinet'? *The New York Times Magazine*, 26 March, <accessed online: https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/26/magazine/can-jim-mattis-hold-the-line-in-trumps-war-cabinet.html>.