



Universiteit Leiden

**EXPLAINING TRUMP'S FOREIGN POLICY:
JACKSONIANISM VERSUS NEOCLASSICAL REALISM**

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Introduction

Donald Trump's election as the forty-fifth president of the United States turned the world upside down. Never had an American presidential candidate fueled so much debate, both inside and outside the US. What made Trump different than his predecessors was not only his lack of political experience, but also his ambition to radically change the American political landscape. An aspect of Trump's ideology that alarmed the world the most, was his rejection of the traditional American grand strategy of liberal internationalism.

In his public statements, Trump fiercely criticized the core principles of the traditional American foreign policy. For example, Trump discredited the long-cherished goal of enhancing an interdependent global economy by criticizing multilateral trade agreements and the trade deficits. Only three days after being sworn into office, Trump pulled the US out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a free-trade agreement which he called "a rape of our country".¹ Furthermore, Trump often stressed that the US should balance the "massive trade deficit with China".² Another principle that the president disliked was the traditional American support and leadership of the multilateral diplomatic institutions. A notorious example of this was Trump's statement that the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) was an "obsolete" organization and his refusal to reaffirm America's commitment to the NATO allies until they showed their willingness to contribute more.³ Thirdly, Trump rejected the principle of the global promotion of democracy and universal human rights. He claimed that the former American interventions that aimed to spread democracy have proved to be "dangerous" as they were responsible for the instability in the Middle East.⁴ Moreover, instead of denouncing autocratic leaders for their human rights violations, Trump repeatedly flattered them.⁵

In attempt to get a grasp of the potential consequences of Trump's alternative vision on America's grand strategy, many scholars have tried to explain the nature of his presidency. One explanation that gained a lot of significance, was that Trump's ideas and behavior would fit into the Jacksonian foreign policy tradition as outlined by political scientist Walter Russell

¹ Andrew Glass, "Trump scuttles Trans-Pacific trade pact," *Politico*, January 23, 2019, <https://www.politico.com/story/2019/01/23/trans-pacific-trade-pact-2017-1116638>.

² "Transcript: Donald Trump's Foreign Policy Speech," *The New York Times*, April 27, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/28/us/politics/transcript-trump-foreign-policy.html>.

³ Rosie Gray, "Trump Declines to Affirm NATO's Article 5," *The Atlantic*, May 25, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/05/trump-declines-to-affirm-natos-article-5/528129/>.

⁴ "Transcript: Donald Trump's Foreign Policy Speech."

⁵ Such as the Chinese President Xi Jinping, the Russian President Vladimir Putin, and the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, see Krishnadev Calamur, "Nine Notorious Dictators, Nine Shout-Outs from Donald Trump," *The Atlantic*, March 4, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/03/trump-xi-jinping-dictators/554810/>.

Mead. The concept of a Jacksonian tradition was designed by Mead in 2001 and combines populist skepticism of the political elite, nationalist critique of foreign entanglements and a Classical Realist view on international relations.⁶ In January 2016, Mead made the argument that Trump's election rhetoric fitted into the Jacksonian tradition for his comments often consisted out of strong criticism towards the political elite and their traditional grand strategy of liberal internationalism.⁷ Later, multiple scholars adopted this argument and added that Trump's actual foreign policy could also be linked to the Jacksonian tradition.⁸

However, as Trump's presidency had just begun, the general value of this explanation remained unclear. As more foreign policy decisions followed, it became evident that Trump's foreign policy had a considerable level of continuity compared to the one of its not so Jacksonian predecessor Barack Obama.⁹ Furthermore, it seems that the Jacksonian tradition cannot give a strong analysis of the complex processing behind the making of a foreign policy for it does not have a rigorous theoretical framework. Despite these deficiencies, the Jacksonian tradition continues to be used by researchers who study President Trump's foreign policy.

Now Trump's presidency has come to an end, the availability of more information about his foreign policy allows us to test the credibility of the Jacksonian explanation extensively. Therefore, the question arises again whether researchers are right to claim that Jacksonianism can explain Trump's foreign policy? This thesis argues that Jacksonianism does not have enough explanatory power to assess the foreign policy outcomes of the Trump administration due to its lack of theory and methodology. To show this deficiency more clearly, this paper will compare the Jacksonian explanation with another foreign policy approach: Neoclassical Realism (NCR). NCR has gained significance in the study of foreign policy in the recent decades due to its ability to explain both specific state behavior and abnormal international outcomes. Therefore, NCR can give a more inclusive understanding of the processes behind foreign policy-making and explain several aspects of Trump's policies that Jacksonianism cannot.

⁶ This tradition was first outlined by Walter Russell Mead in his book *Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How It Changed the World* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 218-263.

⁷ Walter Russell Mead, "Andrew Jackson, Revenant," *Hudson Institute*, January 17, 2016, <https://www.hudson.org/research/12125-andrew-jackson-revenant>.

⁸ See for example Michael Clarke and Anthony Ricketts, "Donald Trump and American foreign policy: The return of the Jacksonian tradition," *Comparative Strategy* 36, no.4 (2017): 366-79, Anna Dimitrova, "Trump's "America First" Foreign Policy: The Resurgence of the Jacksonian Tradition?," *L'Europe en formation* 382, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 33-46 and Taesuh Cha, "The Return of Jacksonianism: The International Implications of the Trump Phenomenon," *The Washington Quarterly* 39, no. 4 (December 2016): 83-97.

⁹ Matthew Hill and Steven Hurst, "The Trump presidency: continuity and change in US foreign policy," *Global Affairs* 6, no.1 (2020): 1-3.

The first chapter of this paper contains an analysis of the literature that links the Jacksonian tradition to Trump's foreign policy. Why do Mead and many other researchers argue that Jacksonianism can explain the behavior of the Trump administration? Besides answering this question, this chapter will also address the many defects of Mead's four foreign policy traditions. The second chapter will investigate the dominant foreign policy theories. What are their strengths and weaknesses? And how can NCR improve the study of foreign policy-making? Along a theoretical analysis, this chapter will outline this paper's NCR framework.

To show the added value of Neoclassical Realism, the third and fourth chapter of this thesis will test the theory. First, chapter three will separately examine the four domestic variables that, according to this paper's Neoclassical Realist framework, influence the forging of America's foreign policy under the Trump administration. The fourth chapter will investigate the implications of these domestic variables by analyzing how they interacted and formed Trump's foreign policy towards China. A case study of Trump's China policy is used in this chapter to show the utility of Neoclassical Realism in greater detail. This foreign policy issue seems relevant as the US-China relationship currently is one of the hottest debated topics within the study of American foreign politics. As a result, there is a lot of applicable data to conduct a qualitative case study. But what makes this topic even more interesting for this thesis, is the significant role that China plays in Trump's Jacksonian rhetoric. While there are many other issues of Trump's foreign policy that can be linked to the Jacksonian tradition, the scope of this thesis is too limited to research more foreign policy issues.

In the fifth and last chapter, the general conclusion of this paper will be presented. This chapter will answer the question to what extent Neoclassical Realism can give a more comprehensive approach of Trump's foreign policy than the Jacksonian tradition. In addition, this chapter will answer whether the theory of Neoclassical Realism can be used to improve future research on foreign policy.

The methodology of this thesis is based on qualitative research with a process-tracing method. This method is the most representative research method for this paper, as the goal of this paper is to trace and answer of the causal mechanisms behind the coming about of Trump's foreign policy, and more specifically Trump's China policy. Both secondary sources and primary sources will be used. The secondary sources consist out of media reports, academic articles, and books. The primary sources consist of public statements of Trump, official policy documents published by the American government and some statistics related to American public opinion.

Chapter 1

A Literature Review

A prominent example of someone who linked Donald Trump to Jacksonianism was Stephen K. Bannon, Trump's former White House chief strategist and senior counselor. In January 2017 Bannon said in an interview with the Washington Post that Trump's inaugural speech reminded him of Andrew Jackson, the seventh president of the United States. Talking about Trump's speech Bannon said: "It was an unvarnished declaration of the basic principles of his populist and kind of nationalist movement. [...] I don't think we've had a speech like that since Andrew Jackson came to the White House. [...] you could see it was very Jacksonian. It's got a deep, deep root of patriotism there."¹⁰ While this statement received a lot of attention in the national press, Bannon's idea to compare the two presidents was not unique. There are many examples of scholars and politicians who draw parallels between Trump and Jackson too. Interestingly, this included Trump himself. In various public statements Trump described Andrew Jackson as "an amazing figure in American History".¹¹ In addition to these statements, there is also a portrait of Jackson in his Oval Office that proves that Trump is in favor of the popular comparison.¹²

The idea of comparing the two presidents stems from the work of political scientist Walter Russell Mead. In this book 'Special Providence' (2001), Mead talks about the existence of four traditions or basic ways of looking at American foreign policy.¹³ These traditions reflect entrenched regional, economic, social, and class interests; visions for domestic as well as foreign policy; and moral values as well as socioeconomic and political interests.¹⁴ The traditions evolve in response to (inter)national changes and interplay with one another, but together they would have guided American foreign policy since the American Revolution. Mead associates these traditions with four influential historic figures: Alexander Hamilton (1755-1804), Woodrow Wilson (1856-1924), Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826) and Andrew Jackson (1767-1845).

¹⁰ Robert Costa, "Bannon calls Trump's speech 'Jacksonian,'" *The Washington Post*, January 21, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/2017/live-updates/politics/live-coverage-of-trumps-inauguration/bannon-calls-trumps-speech-jacksonian/>.

¹¹ Jonah Engel Bromwich, "The Wild Inauguration of Andrew Jackson, Trump's Populist Predecessor," *The New York Times*, January 20, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/20/us/politics/donald-trump-andrew-jackson.html>.

¹² Olivia B. Waxman, "5 Things to Know About the President Whose Portrait Donald Trump Chose for the Oval Office," *Time*, January 25, 2017, <https://time.com/4649081/andrew-jackson-donald-trump-portrait/>.

¹³ Mead, *Special Providence*.

¹⁴ Walter Russell Mead, *Power, Terror, Peace, and War: America's Grand Strategy in a World at Risk* (New York: Knopf, 2004) 593.

The first tradition is represented by “Hamiltonians” who are in favor of a foreign policy that seeks a global commercial balance of power by protecting free trade opportunities by force if necessary. Hamiltonians seek a strong alliance between the national government and big businesses as they regard it to be essential for both domestic stability and effective action abroad.¹⁵ The second tradition, represented by “Wilsonians”, emphasizes America’s moral mission in the world. Wilsonians want to spread democracy, universal human rights, and end colonialism, controversially also by force if necessary. Wilsonians see humanitarian interventions as a core element of US foreign policy. The “Jeffersonians”, who belong to the third tradition, are very skeptical about foreign interventions and emphasize the importance of protecting and improving vulnerable democratic values at home. Jeffersonians fear that an international overstretch can absorb valuable resources which are needed to solve domestic challenges first. Therefore, they support a limited foreign policy with narrowly defined American international interests.

The last tradition, the “Jacksonian” school, is also not very interested in foreign interventions, believing that the US foreign policy, just like the domestic one, should be focused on “the physical security and the economic well-being of the American people”.¹⁶ Jacksonians share Jeffersonians’ suspicion of the political elite and the ideal that all means of the state should be invested in protecting the American people. But different than Jeffersonians, Jacksonians would be willing to use all means necessary to eliminate foreign enemies once national interests and honor are threatened. Once a foreign conflict starts, Jacksonians want nothing else but an unconditional surrender and total victory.¹⁷ Another distinct aspect of Jacksonianism compared to the other traditions, is that it lacks an intellectual or political foundation. Jacksonianism is best described as an emotional expression of the social, cultural, and religious values of the American folk community, which mainly exists out of white and Christian working-class people.¹⁸ Due to the strong link with the exclusive American folk community, many scholars refer to Mead’s Jacksonian tradition as a unique American variant of populism.¹⁹

Even though ‘Special Providence’ was written long before Trump came to power, Mead managed to revitalize the relevance of his work by applying the Jacksonian tradition to the forty-fifth American president. A compelling argument made by Mead, was that Trump owed

¹⁵ Mead, *Special Providence*, xvii.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 255.

¹⁸ Walter Russell Mead, “The Jacksonian tradition and American foreign policy,” *The National Interest*, no. 58 (1999): 5-9, there 9.

¹⁹ See for example Cha, “The Return of Jacksonianism,” 85 or Jack Holland and Ben Fermor, “The discursive hegemony of Trump’s Jacksonian populism: Race, class, and gender in constructions and contestations of US national identity, 2016–2018,” *Politics* (July 2020): 1-16, there 5.

his surprising election victory to his ability to address the surging force of Jacksonian populist nationalism. Mead argues that the deteriorated socio-economic position of many Americans over the past two decades, in the form of the economic setbacks from the global recession and the alleged zero-sum advancement of multicultural identity politics, have deepened Jacksonian suspicion of neo-liberal political establishment.²⁰ Naturally, Jacksonians are suspicious of elite's beliefs of world reform as they perceive those beliefs as potential threats to the social-economy wellbeing of American citizens. But in 2016, this suspicion was accompanied by a growth of angry populist forces.²¹

During the election of 2016, Trump distinguished himself from the other presidential candidates through exploiting these increasing Jacksonian sentiments. Looking at his campaign rhetoric, Trump clearly used a Jacksonian narrative. Trump presented himself as the folk hero who challenged the political elite that had "betrayed" the American people.²² Besides condemning the political elite, he also expressed a deep suspicion of foreign entanglements and obsession with American power and sovereignty.²³ As a result, Trump mobilized the popular anxieties and angry anti-establishment sentiments of many Americans and became "a blank screen on which Jacksonians project[ed] their hopes".²⁴

Thus, by analyzing Trump's Jacksonian appeal, Mead's foreign policy traditions indeed offered an explanation for the Trump's big support base. However, whereas Mead did not explicitly argue that Jacksonianism would guide Trump's actual foreign policy too, there are multiple scholars who continue to use the Jacksonian tradition as an explanation for the administration's actions. Political scientists Michael Clarke and Anthony Rickett for example called Trump's unwillingness to endorse Article V of the NATO Treaty typically Jacksonian behavior, as this would show the president's Jacksonian ideal to place the American citizen before defending "foreign" interests.²⁵ They also argued that Trump's withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement and the military campaign against the Islamic State fit into a Jacksonian grand strategy.²⁶ Interestingly, some scholars argue that the influence of the Jacksonian tradition is most present within the economic field of Trump's foreign policy. Political scientist Anna Dimitrova for example argued that Trump's ambition to reject

²⁰ Walter Russell Mead, "The Jacksonian Revolt. American Populism and the Liberal Order," *Foreign Affairs* 96, no. 2 (April 2017): 2-7, there 2 or Walter Russell Mead, "Donald Trump's Jacksonian Revolt," *Hudson Institute*, November 13, 2016, <https://www.hudson.org/research/13010-donald-trump-s-jacksonian-revolt>.

²¹ Holland and Fermor, "The Discursive Hegemony of Trump's Jacksonian populism," 5.

²² *Ibid.*, 7.

²³ Walter Russell Mead, "The Man Who Put Andrew Jackson in Trump's Oval Office," interview by Susan Glasser, *Politico Magazine*, January 22, 2018, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2018/01/22/andrew-jackson-donald-trump-216493>

²⁴ Mead, "Andrew Jackson, Revenant."

²⁵ Clarke and Ricketts, "Donald Trump and American foreign policy," 374.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 373.

multilateral trade deals (such as the TPP) and to renegotiate existing agreements (like NAFTA and the US-South Korea trade agreement KORUS) show that the foreign policy has much in common with the unilateralist Jacksonian tradition.²⁷ The US-China trade war might also be labeled as a Jacksonian strategy, as Trump defended the conflict with a populist and aggressive rhetoric that claimed that hard measures were necessary to combat a rival that threatened America's economic interests.

However, there are also many researchers who argue that Trump's rhetoric regarding the United States' foreign policy strategy was inconsistent with his actual policy actions.²⁸ This would suggest that Trump's foreign policy continued many aspects of his not so Jacksonian predecessor Barack Obama.²⁹ An argument in favor of this view is the fact that Trump quickly withdrew his open criticism of NATO and remained largely committed to America's traditional alliances. Other cases which show considerable continuity are Trump's military approach in Afghanistan, the reengagement of diplomacy with North-Korea (despite Trump's initial provoking rhetoric) and the fact that there has not been much rapprochement with Russia.³⁰ Also, when taking a closer look at the development of the American economic policy between 2016 and 2020, the Jacksonian influence might be less clear than most scholars argue. In the case of NAFTA for example, Trump would only partly adapt the conditions and change the name rather than dissolving the whole deal.³¹ The US and South Korea also signed a revised trade pact in September 2018, while Trump had been critical of cooperating with the traditional American ally in 2016. Furthermore, despite ongoing tensions between China and the US, in August 2020 the two countries tried to ease the trade war by having talks over their "phase-one" trade deals signed earlier that year.³² Hence, while Trump's rhetoric can be labeled Jacksonian for its nationalist-populist nature, the Jacksonian tradition does not offer a solid explanation for Trump's many inconsistent actions.

Some scholars argue that the considerable level of inconsistency in Trump's foreign policy can be explained by looking at Mead's other traditions. As argued by author Ross Douthat, one reason for Trump's not-so Jacksonian actions might be that he inherited a

²⁷ Dimitrova, "Trump's "America First" Foreign Policy," 42-43.

²⁸ See for example Corina Lacatus, "Populism and President Trump's approach to foreign policy: An analysis of tweets and rally speeches," *Politics* (July 2020):1-17 or Peter Harris, "Why Trump Won't Retrench: The Militarist Redoubt in American Foreign Policy," *Political Science Quarterly* 133, no. 4 (March 2018):611-640.

²⁹ For an overview on the debate about the consistency between Trump's promises and actual foreign policy action see Hill and Hurst, "The Trump presidency," 1-3.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.

³¹ Ana Swanson and Emily Cochrane, "Trump Signs Trade Deal with Canada and Mexico," *The New York Times*, January 29, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/29/business/economy/usmca-trump.html>.

³² "US election 2020: Has Trump delivered on his promises?," *BBC News*, October 15, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-37982000>.

Hamiltonian-Wilsonian strategic framework that is preserved by a group of the powerful politicians.³³ This view aligns with the well-known “Blob-argument” of Barack Obama’s national security advisor Ben Rhodes. According to this argument there is a powerful US foreign policy establishment (nicknamed the Blob) which prevents the coming about of profound changes in the American Grand Strategy.³⁴

Although Douthat’s argument offers an interesting perspective, it does not solve the unclarity that surrounds Mead’s foreign policy traditions. First, Mead’s traditions are not based on an analytical framework that explains how certain traditions have become dominant whereas others are perceived less important. Furthermore, it remains unclear why he only chose four broad categories and how the traditions have remained so consistent for two hundred years despite huge economic, demographic, and technological alterations in the US.³⁵ The only kind of explanation that Mead gives, is that the American foreign policy is likely to be blend of the four traditions rather than one. But he does not clarify how and to what extent they intertwine, nor does he elaborate which individuals are in power to decide upon the foreign policy. At last, Mead’s foreign policy traditions do not implement the strengths international relations theories. While Mead does look at big external events, he does not carefully analyze the relative distribution of material power in the international political environment like Realism does. Also, Mead does look at charismatic political figures, but he does not specifically consider the perception-making process of American foreign-policy makers like constructivism would. As a result, Mead’s traditions cannot explain why the US might not always choose the appropriate foreign policy response because of unclear external signals or wrong perceptions of political leaders.

In other words, Mead’s traditions have little explanatory power for they lack a causation mechanism, a methodology and the strengths of international relations theories. Jacksonianism might explain how Trump succeeded in getting the support of the American folk community due to a broad analysis of the domestic political base during his presidential election campaign. Nevertheless, Mead’s traditions are weak tools for in-depth analyses of American foreign policy responses. The shortage of in-depth analyses of American foreign policies which use Mead’s paradigms as a theoretical framework can affirm this argument. To sum up, a foreign policy theory with a comprehensive causation model that analyses domestic and systemic factors but

³³ Ross Douthat, “Andrew Jackson in the Persian Gulf,” *The New York Times*, January 7, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/07/opinion/trump-soleimani-iran.html>.

³⁴ Patrick Porter, “Why America’s Grand Strategy Has Not Changed: Power, Habit, and the U.S. Foreign Policy Establishment,” *International Security* 42, no. 4 (Spring 2018): 9-46, there 11.

³⁵ Arnold Beichman, “Providence Abroad.” *National Review* 54, no.1 (January 2002):56 and David Kennedy, “The American Way of Power,” *The American Prospect*, March 5, 2002, <https://prospect.org/features/american-way-power/>.

also the role of agency, would offer a better explanation of America's foreign policy-making. This thesis will deploy such a theory in order to solve the shortcomings of the Jacksonian tradition in explaining Trump's foreign policy.

Chapter 2

Theories of Foreign Policy

In the study of international relations, one can choose between theories of international politics and theories of foreign policy. Whereas theories of international politics can produce general assumptions about the behavior of states, theories of foreign policy can analyze the behavior of an individual state in greater detail. As the latter ability aligns with the aim of this research, the focus of this chapter will be on theories of foreign policy.

There are multiple schools of foreign policy theory. The most prominent one is the Innenpolitik School. Researchers who fit into the Innenpolitik School use an approach that assumes that foreign policy is best understood as the product of a country's internal dynamics, such as its political and economic ideology, national character, partisan politics, or socioeconomic structure.³⁶ The Innenpolitik School is often associated with the international relations theory of Liberalism, because both approaches emphasize bottom-up processes in which representative institutions and the public liberal values can constrain states from selecting policies outside the (domestic) consensus.³⁷ A strength of this approach is that it removes the tendency to characterize a state's foreign policy through international relations oversimplified dichotomies such as hawk/dove, realist/idealist, or internationalist/isolationist.³⁸ However, a shortcoming of such approaches is that they tend to ignore the impact of the structure of the international system and the role of individual foreign policy executives at the highest level of government.³⁹ Whereas Mead's traditions do acknowledge that big external events and charismatic political figures may impact policy responses, they can still be placed into the Innenpolitik School for their primary focus is on the general domestic political context.

The other prominent schools of foreign policy theory are variants of Structural or Neo-Realism. Originally, Neo-Realism was designed to explain international politics rather than the behavior of an individual state.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, many researchers of foreign policy rely on the principles of Neo-Realism to explain a state's behavior. This means that they stress that the structure of the international system has a lot of influence on the behavior of a state. The

³⁶ Innenpolitik as described by Gideon Rose in, "Neoclassical Realism and theories of foreign policy," *World Politics* 51, no. 1 (1998):144-172, there 148. See also Fareed Zakaria, "Realism and Domestic Politics. A Review Essay," *International Security* 17, no. 1 (1992):177- 198, there 180.

³⁷ Norrin Ripsman, "Neoclassical realism," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies*, June 13, 2011, <https://oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.001.0001/acrefore-9780190846626-e-36>.

³⁸ Daniel Hamilton, "Trump's Jacksonian Foreign Policy and its Implications for European Security," *Swedish Institute of International Affairs*, no. 2 (2017):1-8, there 1 and Clarke and Ricketts, "Donald Trump and American Foreign Policy," 367.

³⁹ Gideon Rose, "Neoclassical Realism and theories of foreign policy," 148.

⁴⁰ Ripsman, "Neoclassical Realism," 3.

structure of the international system can be defined through five components: unitary and rational states, anarchy, insecurity, a quest for survival and a particular distribution of power capabilities. The primary actors in this system are territorial states, but none of these actors exists above all others states as there is no central authority or world government. As a result of this anarchy, the nature of the system is insecure, and all states must take care of their own to survive and prosper. To ensure their own security, states would be wary of cooperation and interdependence, and rather aim to attain a substantive amount of power relative to other states.

The first Realist foreign policy school is Defensive Realism. This theory was developed by political scientist Kenneth Waltz. According to Waltz, the main assumption of Defensive Realism is that the anarchic nature of the international system motivates states to maintain a moderate and restrained foreign policy to ensure security.⁴¹ The drive of states to ensure their individual security would result in a general tendency to deter external threats by balancing behavior. This could mean internal balancing, which is reinforcing a state's capabilities, or external balancing which refers to alliance building.⁴² Defensive Realism does not deny that there are incentives for territorial expansion and interstate conflict, however it assumes that those are rare. Only in certain situations when states seriously start to fear each other, for example in times of war, is a state likely to use offensive means.

The second Realist foreign policy school is called Offensive Realism. Political scientist John Mearsheimer, who is the leading proponent of this theory, argued that Offensive Realism is based on the principle that the anarchical structure of the international system promotes assertive state behavior as states try to maximize their power to guarantee their security.⁴³ According to Mearsheimer, only a misguided state will accept that it has a sufficient amount of power and pass off opportunities to become an international hegemon, simply because other states will then take advantage of those opportunities. However, a state's relative power capabilities and the external environment decide how assertive a state can act towards others. Whereas Defensive Realism argues that balancing can be a favorable option for a state to maximize its relative capabilities, the preferred strategy would be 'buck-passing'.⁴⁴ This means that a state first aims to limit its own expenses by letting others deter and fight the external threats. If both the buck-passing and the balancing strategies do not help a state to maximize its power, the last resort is war.

⁴¹ Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (London: Addison-Wesley, 1979).

⁴² Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 126.

⁴³ John J. Mearsheimer, *The tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001).

⁴⁴ Mearsheimer, *The tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 28.

By assuming that a country's foreign policy is primarily driven by the incentives that are induced from the structure of the international system, Neo-Realist foreign policy theories can explain why states with different political systems can behave in a similar way.⁴⁵ However, due to their external determinism and lack of detail for a state's individual behavior, they cannot explain why states occasionally do not choose the optimal policy response to satisfy systemic stimuli. For example, critics of the Neo-Realist approaches have shown that states do not always respond correctly due to misperceptions or irrational behavior of state leaders.⁴⁶ Other reasons why a state might respond incorrectly to systemic stimuli is that domestic political or economic conditions can limit a government from mobilizing all the resources it needs to act appropriately.⁴⁷ Furthermore, there might be a lack of clear signals about the threats and opportunities that arise in the international system.⁴⁸ The domestic decision-making environment is thus more complex than Neo-Realist foreign policy theories assume. To summarize, while structural theories like defensive and Offensive Realism can explain similar state behavior under similar circumstances, an Innenpolitik approach like Jacksonianism can explain why a state behaves differently under similar circumstances.

A theory that might combine the strengths of the Neo-Realist foreign policy theories and the Jacksonian Innenpolitik approach is Neoclassical Realism (NCR). NCR is a theory that argues that a state's foreign policy is primarily driven by systemic impulses in the anarchic international system like Neo-Realism suggests, while it also addresses the impact of domestic politics, elite's perception and institutions like Classical Realism does. As stated by Gideon Rose, the author who first termed the theory: "Neoclassical Realists argue that the scope and ambition of a country's foreign policy is driven first and foremost by its place in the international system and specifically by its relative material power. [...] They argue further, however, that the impact of such power capabilities on foreign policy is indirect and complex, because systemic pressures must be translated through intervening variables at the unit level."⁴⁹ In practice this means that Neoclassical Realists have improved Neo-Realist research methods

⁴⁵ Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 72.

⁴⁶ Robert Jervis, *Perception, and misperception in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976); Ole Holsti, "Theories of crisis decision-making," in Paul Gordon Lauren, *Diplomacy: New Approaches in History, Theory, and Policy* (New York: London Free Press, 1980), 99–136.

⁴⁷ Randall L. Schweller, *Unanswered Threats: Political Constraints on the Balance of Power* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

⁴⁸ Norrin M. Ripsman, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, and Steven E. Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016) 21.

⁴⁹ Rose, "Neoclassical Realism and theories of foreign policy," 146.

by using both independent and intervening variables. And because of this, Neoclassical Realists can analyze both divergent outcomes and specific state behavior.⁵⁰

One point of criticism regarding NCR is that it only offers a toolkit for analysis rather than being a solid theory, which would undermine its explanatory power. One reason for this would be that the NCR approach does not have one comprehensive model that explains which intervening variables should be used, leading to diverse research designs and ad hoc selections.⁵¹ Furthermore, NCR research would not include distinctive sets of hypotheses which gives the approach less predictive power.⁵² Nevertheless, in their book ‘Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics’ researchers Norrin Ripsman, Jeffrey Taliaferro and Steven Lobell (hereafter referred to as Ripsman et al.) have set up a more solid NCR framework to improve NCR research. In this framework, as illustrated by figure 1, the authors make a distinction between the independent variable, the dependent variables, and the intervening variables.

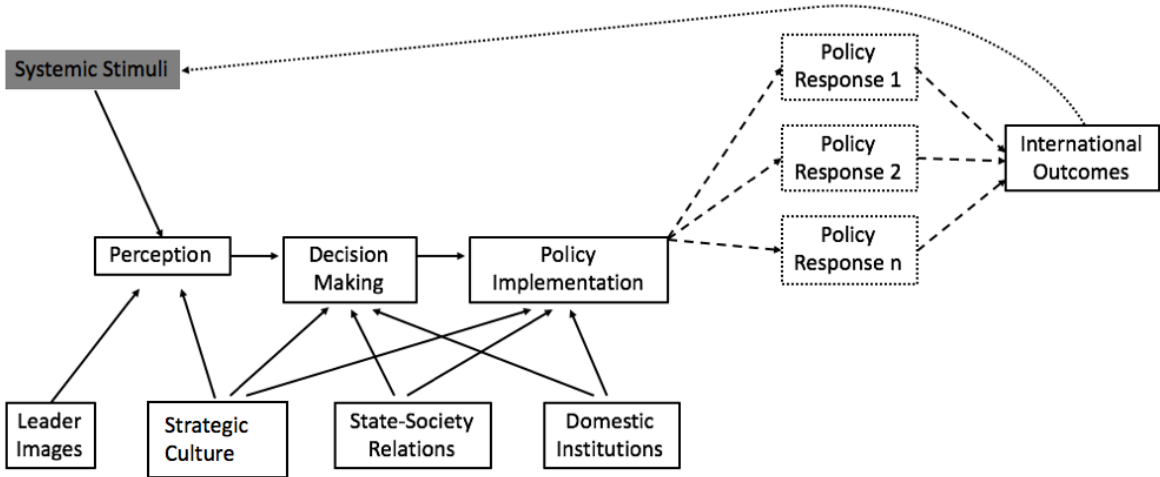


Figure 1: Neoclassical Realist model of foreign policy from *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics* by N. Ripsman, J. Taliaferro, and S. Lobell (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 34.

The independent variable is the systemic stimuli, meaning the threats and the opportunities that arise in the international political environment in which states interact. The dependent variables are the state’s foreign policy choices which are influenced by the international outcomes and structural change in the international system. Concerning the intervening variables, the authors name four domestic political clusters which affect three

⁵⁰ Nicolas Ross Smith, “Can Neoclassical Realism become a genuine theory of International Relations?,” *Journal of Politics* 80, no. 2 (February 2018): 742- 49, there 742.

⁵¹ Smith, “Can Neoclassical Realism become a genuine theory of International Relations?,” 745.

⁵² Stephen Walt, “The Enduring Relevance of the Realist Tradition” in Ira Katznelson and Helen V. Milner, *Political Science: State of the Discipline* (Norton: American Political Science Association, 2002): 197-230, there 211.

intervening-level processes of policy-making and are common to the NCR theory. The first domestic variable cluster refers to leader images, meaning the beliefs or images of politicians charged with the making of foreign and defense policies.⁵³ The second cluster is named the strategic culture, which refers to both the organizational culture of the military and bureaucratic institutions but also the deep-rooted cultural beliefs in society.⁵⁴ Thirdly, the state-society relations cluster, is about the interactions between the central government institutions and economic or societal groups.⁵⁵ And last, the domestic institutions materialize state-society relations in organizational routines and processes.⁵⁶

As illustrated in figure 1, the four domestic variable clusters can influence one or more of the three intervening level processes related to systemic stimuli: perception, decision-making and policy implementation. Leader images thus influence the accuracy of perceptions; the strategic culture shapes a state's general responses; state-society relations, affect the state's ability to determine and implement decisions; and domestic political institutions, can either enable or constrain state leaders when they face societal opposition.⁵⁷

The interaction between the four variable clusters and the three intervening level processes works as a transmission belt for translating systemic stimuli into foreign policy responses and international outcomes.⁵⁸ A result of the domestic decision-making processes, a state can choose between multiple policy options. However, none of these possible policy options might be the optimal response to satisfy systemic stimuli, simply because not only systemic constraints but domestic political imperatives as well determine the foreign policy of a state.

So, to what extent can this Neoclassical Realism offer a more solid account of the foreign policy responses under the Trump administration than Mead's 'Innenpolitik' analysis? The general hypothesis of this paper is that the Neoclassical Realist framework of Ripsman et al. can give a more comprehensive account of Trump's foreign policy than the Mead's Jacksonian tradition. Mead's traditions lack a clear methodology and causational model, whereas the Neoclassical Realist framework of Ripsman et al. can offer an analytical framework that can analyze both (unclear) external and domestic factors. The hypothesis of this paper will be tested in the next two chapters.

⁵³ Ripsman et al., *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics*, 61.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 70-71.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁵⁷ Ripsman, "Neoclassical Realism," 9.

⁵⁸ Smith, "Can Neoclassical Realism become a genuine theory of International Relations?," 746.

Chapter 3

Trump's Foreign Policy - An Analysis of the Domestic Variables

The hypothesis of this paper will be tested in two parts. In this chapter, it will be tested how Ripsman et al.'s four broad variable clusters fit into the American foreign policy under the Trump administration. This analysis can give an impression of the factors that influenced every foreign policy issue under the Trump administration. To see how these four variable clusters interacted and affected to three intervening level processes in greater detail, a case study about the Trump's China Policy will follow in the next chapter.

There are two points of caution that should be noted before reading the empirical chapters of this thesis. First, while this thesis suggests that approaches that solely focus on systemic or domestic variables should be questioned, it does not necessarily dismiss research that includes both variables but in a different manner than here. Such approaches could also offer interesting perspectives on Trump's foreign policy-making. The framework of this thesis is just one theoretical attempt based on Neoclassical Realism to analyze the foreign policy of the Trump administration. Second, the Neoclassical Realist framework of this paper includes the major features but might not capture all characteristics of Trump's foreign policy-making. Nonetheless, it should still give a more nuanced explanation of the nature the US foreign policy than the simplistic Jacksonian tradition for it analyses both international and domestic features and their interaction.

Following Mead's Jacksonian tradition, one would predict that the Trump administration would act upon the president's disdain for multilateralism by withdrawing the US from multilateral institutions and trade agreements that are not directly beneficial for the US. Moreover, the tradition suggests that a Jacksonian administration would decrease its military interventions in areas in which the US is not directly threatened. However, the Jacksonian tradition could not predict that the Trump administration would continue many aspects of the Obama administration nor does it explain the processes behind the making of the foreign policy of the forty-fifth president. How does the Trump administration understand foreign policy issues and what factors influence the processes of foreign policy-making?

This chapter will present the first part of this research to answer this question. In this chapter it will be examined how Ripsman et al.'s domestic variable clusters can be used to look at the factors that affected the American foreign policy under the Trump administration. The four domestic variables that will be discussed are: the leader images of Trump, the American strategic culture, the American state-society relations, and the American political institutions.

The Leader Images of Donald Trump

According to Ripsman et al., the variable ‘leader images’ refers to the beliefs, core values or images of the individuals who are charged with making the decisions about a state’s foreign policies.⁵⁹ These foreign policy executives can include the president, the prime minister, the key cabinet members or prominent foreign policy advisors. For this thesis, it is decided to refer to this variable as Trump’s perception of international affairs and America’s place in the international system.

One way to interpret Trump’s perception on America’s foreign policy issues is to look at his public speeches, as these were used by Trump to promote his political views. What seems striking about Trump’s speeches, is that he often assumes that there is a strong correlation between America’s material decline and the country’s previous foreign policy. A campaign speech in which Trump suggested this correlation, was his foreign policy speech made on 27 April 2016. In this speech, Trump accused Obama’s foreign policy for drastically weakening America’s power, through wasteful spending such as the enlargement of foreign debts and trade deficits. Furthermore, he said that this policy caused a loss of international respect for the US. Trump argued that in order to “Make America Great Again”, he wanted to “rebuild” the American military to ensure its global dominance and to “rebalance” America’s commitments to its allies.⁶⁰ He also said that he wanted to “reinvigorate western values and institutions”, meaning that he disapproved the traditional goal of spreading “universal values that not everybody shares or wants”.⁶¹ Besides wanting to invest more effort in combatting the Islamic State, Trump’s speech generally promoted the argument that the US should stop investing valuable resources in foreign actors as they were rather necessary to strengthen America’s weakened military and economy.

In his later speeches, Trump continued to stress his belief that the traditional American foreign policy approach was the main cause of America’s declining power. Another important speech which shows this vision, is his inaugural address made on 20 January 2017.⁶² While this speech was focused on domestic issues, Trump indirectly talked about foreign policy as well because he clearly linked America’s domestic problems to Washington’s former foreign trade policy. The argument he made was that by allowing other states (especially China) to trade

⁵⁹ Ripsman et al., *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics*, 61.

⁶⁰ “Transcript: Donald Trump’s Foreign Policy Speech.”

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Donald Trump, “The Inaugural Address,” *The White House*, January 20, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/the-inaugural-address/>.

manufactured goods with the US, Washington had badly harmed the domestic industry. For example, Trump said that: “We’ve enriched foreign industry at the expense of American industry” and “one by one, the factories shuttered and left our shores, with not even a thought about the millions upon millions of American workers left behind. The wealth of our middle class has been ripped from their homes and then redistributed across the entire world”.⁶³ In addition, Trump argued that other states had taken advantage of the US through “making our products, stealing our companies, and destroying our jobs”.⁶⁴ As Trump had done in his previous campaign speeches, he promised to solve the situation by bringing back American jobs and to eliminate the America’s large trade deficit.

Trump would continue his critique on the traditional American trade policy during his entire presidency. During the period prior to his mid-term election in November 2018, Trump for example mentioned that one of his administration’s greatest achievement was the new trade deal with Mexico and Canada, for this would have a very positive impact on the economic growth of the US.⁶⁵ Furthermore, he argued that this deal generated more global respect for the US.⁶⁶ It is often argued that Trump’s concern about America’s economy and trade, and trade deficits in particular, determine his perception of what the priorities of US foreign policy should be. For instance, Trump continued to strive for “fairer” free trade deals, while he appeared to be less committed to his other campaign promises, such as reducing foreign military interventions.⁶⁷ Thus, Trump’s perception of international affairs appears to be determined by how he interprets America’s economic security and leverage upon other states.

The American Strategic Culture

Ripsman et al. define the variable of ‘strategic culture’ as the organizational culture of the military and bureaucratic institutions in combination with the broader cultural beliefs of a society.⁶⁸ A state’s strategic culture results from its geography, resources, history, and social-political structure. When describing the implications of a state’s strategic culture, Ripsman et al. argue that it shapes the collective norms and expectations of what constitutes an acceptable foreign policy response. Therefore, a strategic culture has the power to constrain political leaders from acting freely.⁶⁹

⁶³ Trump, “The Inaugural Address.”

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Donald Trump, “Speech: Donald Trump Holds a Political Rally Topeka Kansas”, *Factbase*, October 6, 2018, <https://factba.se/transcript/donald-trump-speech-maga-rally-topeka-ks-october-6-2018>.

⁶⁶ Trump, “Rally Speech. Topeka Kansas.”

⁶⁷ Lacatus, “Populism and President Trump’s approach to foreign policy,” 4.

⁶⁸ Ripsman et al., *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics*, 66.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 67.

A way to analyze a state's strategic culture is by looking at its grand strategy, for this concept often illustrates a state's strategic culture and determines how to act upon it. According to the international relations scholar Patrick Porter, the American grand strategy has consisted of four features since the end of the Cold War.⁷⁰ The first feature is to have a strong military that can combat and deter foreign rivals. The second one is to reassure and contain foreign allies. Thirdly, the US would aim to integrate other states into its self-designed institutions and markets. And the last feature, is the ambition to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons.

It should be noted that the American grand strategy has lost credibility due to the unsuccessful American involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the financial crisis of 2008.⁷¹ Trump often referred to these failures to plea against the traditional American grand strategy and its influential supporters. While Trump was in favor of strengthening the US military forces, he rejected all other features. He repeatedly threatened to abandon foreign alliances, he strongly criticized free trade deals and the utility of multilateral institutions such as NATO and the UN, and he even seemed to tolerate nuclear proliferation. Furthermore, Trump often emphasized that the support of the Washington establishment for these features caused America's declining power, for they solely served the interests this group of elites rather than interests of the American citizens.⁷²

Despite a general fear that Trump would further discredit the America's grand strategy, many scholars argue that it continues to be the dominant feature of the American foreign policy, even under the Trump administration.⁷³ Porter substantiates this argument by explaining that a combination of America's resilient material power and entrenched habits perpetuated by the influential Washington establishment, strongly inhibit change.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ Porter, "Why America's Grand Strategy Has Not Changed," 9.

⁷¹ Mark Beeson, "Donald Trump and Post-Pivot Asia: The Implications of a "Transactional" Approach to foreign policy," *Asian Studies Review* 44, no.1 (2020):10-27, there 13.

⁷² See for example Trump, "The Inaugural Address."

⁷³ See for example Paul K. MacDonald, "America First? Explaining continuity and change in Trump's Foreign Policy," *Political Science Quarterly* 133, no. 3 (2018): 401-34 or Hill and Hurst, "The Trump presidency: continuity and change in US foreign policy."

⁷⁴ Porter, "Why America's Grand Strategy Has Not Changed," 11.

The American State-Society Relations

The American state-society relations can be defined as the interactions between central state institutions and various economic or societal groups.⁷⁵ An important issue related to this variable is which socio-economic interest group have a dominant relationship with the state and can thereby significantly affect the state's policies.⁷⁶

In the study of American politics and society, the pluralist theory of government used to be dominant. The pluralist theory argues that although there are elite members of society, no particular social group would dominate US politics as a variety of interest groups and organizations distribute the political power.⁷⁷ Furthermore, it can be argued that all citizens can influence American politics through their representation by elected Congress members and voicing their social demands in the media. Another sociological theory that remains significant as well, is the elite theory. This theory presumes that the US government, together with its large corporations and military, is controlled by a small group of elites situated at the top of the American society.⁷⁸ It is often claimed that this group of elites would predominantly consist out of the American cooperate community, mainly the leaders of large (multinational) corporations, important think tanks directors and the owners of corporate wealth.⁷⁹ To preserve its interests, this group would actively use its power and network to shape policy-making in the US.

While an anti-elite rhetoric was central to Trump's election campaign, the elite theory did gain more credibility during the Trump era. On the one hand, Trump did fulfill his campaign promise to denounce those who defended the status quo as his top foreign-policy makers were predominantly from outside the Washington-based foreign-policy establishment. In January 2017, only two of his thirty top foreign-policy makers had prior experience in federal state positions.⁸⁰ Furthermore, there were few connections with important think tanks or research institutions, which is in stark contrast with Trump's predecessors.⁸¹ On the other hand, there were many administration members with corporate affiliations. At the start of Trump's presidency in January 2017, 72 percent of the individuals that worked for the administration

⁷⁵ Ripsman et al., *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics*, 71.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 71-73.

⁷⁷ This theory was coined by Robert Dahl in *Who Governs? Democracy and power in an American city* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961).

⁷⁸ Wright Mills was the first scholar to apply this theory on the system of power in the United States in his book *The Power Elite* (London: Oxford University Press, 1956).

⁷⁹ See for example Thomas R. Dye, *Top Down Policymaking* (New York: Chatham House, 2001) or William G. Domhoff, *Who Rules America?* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1967).

⁸⁰ Nana de Graaff and Bastiaan van Apeldoorn, "The Transnationalist US Foreign-policy Elite in Exile? A Comparative Network Analysis of the Trump Administration," *Global Networks* (November 2019):1- 27, there 9.

⁸¹ de Graaff and van Apeldoorn, "The Transnationalist US Foreign-policy Elite in Exile?," 16.

came from the corporate sphere.⁸² As regards to Trump's foreign policy staff, this was even more than 80 percent.⁸³ While these numbers are outstanding, the Trump administration did follow the general trend. Namely, research has shown that around two-thirds of the America's top foreign-policy makers of the past three administrations before Trump, had top-level corporate affiliations before serving in a presidential administration.⁸⁴ Furthermore, about half of them returned to the corporate world after they left the government.⁸⁵ What also seems to confirm that corporate interests highly influenced Trump's policy-making, is the fact that the president rejected any openness about his wealth and that he favored individuals with clear interests in influencing governments policies in exchange for holding events and engaging in transactions in Trump-related businesses.⁸⁶

While it remains hard to prove who exactly has leverage upon the American government and thus the foreign policy-making processes too, it seems plausible that Trump enabled the corporate sector to easily communicate its interests and could therefore influence the administration's foreign policy.

The American Political Institutions

This variable refers to the structure of a state and the domestic institutions which crystallize the state-society relations by making and executing a state's foreign policy.⁸⁷ The most important institutions related to the US foreign policy that can be analyzed are the State Department, the Department of Defense, the National Security Council, the Congress, and the presidential administration. The State Department, the Department of Defense and the National Security Council are all shaped by the presidential administration and thus mainly implement the details of the foreign policy which was first broadly laid out by the president. Nevertheless, they can advise the president on national security, military, and foreign policy issues.

While the aforementioned institutions are mainly responsible for shaping the foreign policy, the American Congress has some legislative power to influence it. For instance, the Congress has the power to authorize and appropriate funds for defense (both nationally and internationally), to legislate the administration's trade and economic policies and to declare

⁸² Timothy Gill, "Why the power elite continues to dominate American politics," *The Washington Post*, December 24, 2018 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2018/12/24/why-power-elite-continues-dominate-american-politics/>.

⁸³ De Graaff and van Apeldoorn, "The Transnationalist US Foreign-policy Elite in Exile?," 10.

⁸⁴ Nana de Graaff and Bastiaan van Apeldoorn, "US-China Relations and the Liberal World Order: Contending Elites, Colliding Visions?," *International Affairs* 94, no. 1 (2018): 113-31, there 123.

⁸⁵ de Graaff and Bastiaan van Apeldoorn, "US-China relations and the liberal world order," 123.

⁸⁶ Salvador Santino Regilme, "The Decline of American Power and Donald Trump: Reflections on Human Rights, Neoliberalism, and the World Order," *Geoforum* 102 (2019):157- 66, there 163.

⁸⁷ Ripsman et al., *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics*, 75.

war.⁸⁸ While the president negotiates international treaties and appoints the secretaries and the ambassadors, the Congress officially needs to approve those treaties and appointments before they can be enforced.⁸⁹ At last, the Congress might also influence foreign policy through proposing sanctions, which can induce the administration to take foreign policy actions.⁹⁰ In short, the president and his departments are responsible for designing and executing the American foreign policy, but they need congressional approval to implement it.

The American Congress thus has the formal duty to check and balance the power of the president. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the Congress's oversight of the US foreign policy has declined since the second world war, and especially since the mid-1990s. As argued by historian Arthur Schlesinger in the 1970s, the original checks of the constitution did not take into account that the US would become a superpower state nor were they flexible enough to be revised in order to keep up with this transition.⁹¹ As a result, American presidents have acquired more powers beyond the original limits of the constitution. Another change that since the 1990s further reduced the ability of the legislative body to constrain the power of the executive branch, is the increased polarization between the Republican and Democratic parties and a decrease of foreign policy expertise among members of Congress.⁹² As a result, the decision-making processes regarding foreign issues have become centralized in the White House.

Concluding Remarks

To sum up, this chapter has outlined the domestic variables that influence the foreign policy-making processes of the Trump administration. First, it was argued that Trump's concern about America's weakened economic status can be considered a driving force behind his perception of what America's foreign policy priorities are. Secondly, it was argued that despite some loss of credibility and Trump's strong criticism, the American strategic culture and traditional grand strategy are likely to remain an influential factor in the making of foreign policy. As to the American state-society relations, it was suggested that corporate interests are likely to have much leverage on Trump's foreign policy. At last, a brief overview of the American political institutions explained that the Trump administration can circumvent the checks and balances of

⁸⁸ Theodore Lowi, Benjamin Ginsberg and Kenneth Shepsle, *American Government: Power and Purpose* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006), 163.

⁸⁹ Lowi, Ginsberg and Shepsle, *American Government*, 163.

⁹⁰ Jordan Tama, "Forcing the President's Hand: How the US Congress Shapes Foreign Policy through Sanctions Legislation," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 16, no. 3 (2020): 397-416.

⁹¹ Arthur M. Schlesinger, *The Imperial Presidency* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973).

⁹² James Goldgeier and Elizabeth Saunders, "The Unconstrained Presidency: Checks and Balances Eroded Long Before Trump," *Council on Foreign Affairs*, August 14, 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/article/unconstrained-presidency-checks-and-balances-eroded-long-trump>.

the Congress when executing his desired foreign policy responses. Knowing which domestic variables influence the construction of Trump's foreign policy, this paper can now proceed in studying a case study to analyze the impact of these variables in greater detail.

Chapter 4

Trump's China Policy - Testing the Domestic Variables

When Donald Trump became the forty-fifth American president, the US was facing an increased security threat from China. In the last two decades, China has become the second biggest economy of the world and it is increasingly trying to weaken the dominant influence of the US on the global economic system, by actively promoting a diversification of the international monetary and investment system. China's foundation of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and its Belt and Road Initiative are clear examples of this.⁹³ Meanwhile, the huge Chinese trade surplus with US, in combination with low currency value of the Chinese yuan and large amount of American treasury notes, have also increased China's leverage over the American economy.⁹⁴ Along these economic projects, China has developed a military system which can be used to block American activities in the Asia-Pacific region. Furthermore, the state is increasingly trying to expand its territory in the disputed areas of the South China sea, Hong Kong, and Taiwan.

All these phenomena have significantly altered the relative distribution of power in the international system in China's favor. Whereas the United States is still the world's superpower, China is following up and has the potential to take America's place. In other words, finding an appropriate strategy to deal with China's increased power and to protect America's interests, is a priority of the American government. How does the Trump administration understand this increasingly competitive bilateral relationship and how does it define America's policy related to this issue?

Again, following Mead's Jacksonian tradition, one would predict that an administration led by a Jacksonian leader would adopt an aggressive policy towards China for the state forms a direct threat to America's interests. Furthermore, it would suggest that the Trump administration would be less committed to America's traditional alliances and withdraw US forces to save valuable resources that were necessary to solve America's urgent problems. However, Trump's actual China and Asia-Pacific policy proved to be more nuanced these predictions.

The previous chapter gave an impression of the domestic factors that influenced America's general foreign policy under the Trump administration according to the Neoclassical

⁹³ Zhaohui Wang, "Understanding Trump's Trade Policy with China: International Pressures Meet Domestic Politics," *Pacific Focus* 34, no. 3 (2019): 376-407, there 388.

⁹⁴R. Wolverson and C. Alessi, "Confronting U.S.-China Economic Imbalances," *Council on Foreign Relations*, November 2, 2011 <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/confronting-us-china-economic-imbances>

Realist framework of Ripsman et al. This chapter will apply the Neoclassical Realist framework a more specific foreign policy issue, namely Trump's China policy, and to a lesser extent Trump's Asia-Pacific policy. This case study will show in greater detail how the interaction between the four variable clusters during the three policy processes, works as a transmission belt for translating the systemic stimulus, the increasingly competitive US-China relationship, into foreign policy responses. This chapter will now proceed by analyzing how the previously discussed domestic variables interacted and affected the three policy processes of Trump's China policy: the perception process, the decision-making process, and the implementation process. At the end it will become clear that Trump's leader images greatly affected the policy processes regarding America's trade policy towards China, whereas the other three variables overruled the impact of these images on the security and ideological aspects of Trump's China policy.

The Perception Process

As explained by Ripsman et al., the perception process can be defined as the first policy phase, in which incoming systemic stimuli are being interpreted. Ripsman et al. stress that the perception process is not only affected by international factors but also results from the leader's images and a state's strategic culture.

When talking about the impact of these domestic variables, Ripsman et al. argue that leader images have the greatest impact on policy-making when decisions have to be made quickly, whereas the strategic culture influences both short-term and longer-term foreign policy planning.⁹⁵ They explain this by stating that when secrecy and quick decisions are required, such as in crisis situations, leaders tend to have more control while more decision time gives other actors the opportunity to get involved and to contribute.⁹⁶ However, as a state's strategic culture is often entrenched in society and political institutions, this variable tends to have a significant influence at all times. Policymakers do not like to attract much opposition or jeopardize their power and thus often do not risk making policies that go against the strategic culture.⁹⁷ So how did the interaction between Trump's images and the American strategic culture regarding China's rise shape the perception process?

Going back to the earlier discussed foreign policy speech, Trump made it clear how he perceived China's rise. In this speech, Trump argued that the US should take a tougher stance

⁹⁵ Ripsman et al, *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics*, 91.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 92.

towards China for the state's growth went hand in hand with America's decreased wealth. He accused China from assaulting American jobs and wealth, stealing government secrets through cyber-attacks, engaging industrial espionage against the US, and violating its commitments under the World Trade Organization.⁹⁸ Interestingly, whereas Trump talked a lot about China's economic assault, he barely criticized China's expansive actions in the South China Sea. This is surprising, since these actions threaten America's security interests in the region, such as the freedom of navigation in an important trade route and the safety American allies.⁹⁹

Many of Trump's speeches related to China, show that the president prioritized the economic aspects of the bilateral relationship. For example, in Trump's addresses to the UN General Assembly of 2018 and 2019, his comments on China were mostly related to trade and how the state had damaged the American economy.¹⁰⁰ In both speeches, Trump did not explicitly denounce China's human rights violations or the state's expansionist actions, this while criticism towards these issues had increased among Congress and the American public opinion. In situations in which Trump did devote attention to these affairs, he used a less aggressive rhetoric than towards trade issues.

A good example that confirms this argument is Trump's statements on the Uyghur affaire. While the Trump administration has imposed sanctions in the name of human rights violations in Iran and Venezuela, Trump stated that he did not want to do the same in the case of the mass internment of ethnic Uyghurs for that might jeopardize the trade talks with Beijing.¹⁰¹ As Chinese officials have often angrily rejected foreign criticism of their treatment of the Uyghur population by calling it unacceptable interference into China's internal affairs, Trump clearly used a pragmatic approach to avoid further bilateral tensions.

Trump said similar things about China's repressive actions in Hong Kong. In November 2019, Trump refused to sign a legislation to support pro-democracy activists in Hong Kong even though this bill was broadly supported by the Congress. Trump argued that he did support the protesters, but that he could not sign the bill as he was still "in the process of making the

⁹⁸ "Transcript: Donald Trump's Foreign Policy Speech."

⁹⁹ Lester B. Stone, *Global Power Revlry and South China Sea* (London: VIJ Books, 2018).

¹⁰⁰ See "Remarks by President Trump to the 73rd Session of the United Nations General Assembly," *The White House*, September 25, 2018, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-73rd-session-united-nations-general-assembly-new-york-ny/> and "Remarks by President Trump to the 74th Session of the United Nations General Assembly," *The White House*, September 25, 2019, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-74th-session-united-nations-general-assembly/>.

¹⁰¹ Michael Crowley, "Trump Says He Avoided Punishing China Over Uighur Camps to Protect Trade Talks," *The New York Times*, June 21, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/21/us/politics/trump-uighurs-china-trade.html>.

largest trade deal in history”.¹⁰² Furthermore, when talking about this issue, Trump repeatedly said that he considered the Chinese president Xi Jinping a great leader and a friend.¹⁰³

Concerning Trump’s narrative about the “unfair” trade relation with China, Trump mostly talked about how China’s currency manipulation had led to an enormous American trade deficit which threatened America’s sovereignty. It is true that China has increased its leverage on the American economy. China has bought a lot of American treasury notes to maintain a high yuan-dollar exchange rate, and as a result China is one of the largest lenders to the American government. If China would decide to sell its American treasury notes, it could bring the US economy into a recession.¹⁰⁴ Furthermore, due to China’s currency politics, it is harder for the US to export to China than it is the other way around, which indeed increases America’s trade deficit.

However, it needs to be emphasized this situation does not necessarily undermine America’s interests. China’s currency policy is allowed under the current rules of the International Monetary Fund (which were shaped by the US) and that it also helps to reduce America’s trade deficit as it inhibits the exchange rate from rising too quickly.¹⁰⁵ Moreover, it is unlikely that China would want to start an American recession, for this would badly hurt the Chinese export market. In addition, Trump’s narrative ignores the argument that all Americans highly profit from the China’s currency policy as this results in lower consumer prices. America’s trade deficit with China thus also serves US interests. Consequently, America’s grand strategy used to stimulate close economic cooperation with China and enhance free trade opportunities rather than to reject these values. In that sense, Trump’s perception of how to approach China economically clearly differentiates from America’s strategic culture.

Looking at Trump’s controversial comments on decreasing America’s commitment to its allies and allowing them to develop the nuclear weapons, it is tempting to suggest that Trump’s image regarding the security aspects of America’s China or Asia policy also largely differentiated from America’s strategic culture. After all, while many politicians had used the “burden sharing” argument before, most did not dare to propose that states like Japan and South Korea should develop nuclear weapons.¹⁰⁶ However, Trump’s image regarding the security aspects of America’s Asia-Pacific policy only differentiated from the strategic culture in

¹⁰² Ana Swanson and Michael Crowley, “Trump says he’s ‘standing with Xi (and with Hong Kong’s protesters),” *The New York Times*, November 22, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/22/us/politics/trump-hong-kong-protests-xi.html>.

¹⁰³ Swanson and Crowley, “Trump says he’s ‘standing with Xi.”

¹⁰⁴ Wolverson and Alessi, “Confronting U.S.-China Economic Imbalances.”

¹⁰⁵ Ralph W. Huenemann, “United States–China Trade: President Trump’s Misunderstandings,” *Asia & the Pacific Policy Studies* 5, no. 1 (2018): 150-54, there 151.

¹⁰⁶ Robert Sutter and Satu P. Limaye, “America’s 2016 election debate on Asian Policy and Asian Reactions,” *East-West Center* (2016) <https://www.eastwestcenter.org/publications/americas-2016-election-debate-asia-policy-and-asian-reactions>.

scenario's when he perceived that the traditional security strategy undermined America's economic interests. For instance, during his entire presidency Trump would continuously demand new bilateral trade deals, but he would soften his initial critical stance on security issues such as America's traditional 'One China policy', making alliances more conditional and allowing nuclear proliferation.¹⁰⁷

The Decision-Making Process

As explained Ripsman et al., the decision-making process is the second policy phase in which policymakers discuss and decide how an appropriate foreign policy should look like. Because this process often takes a considerable amount of time, important interest groups and institutions tend to get more opportunities to be involved.¹⁰⁸ Hence, foreign policy executives are now also influenced by the state-society relations and the domestic political institutions variables, besides the strategic culture. In this process, the state's leaders have thus less chances to sidestep important interest groups or institutions with veto powers.¹⁰⁹ In addition, Ripsman et al. noted that: "The degree to which state-society relations are cooperative rather than competitive and the degree to which domestic political institutions allow the executive greater policy autonomy will be of great significance to policy planning endeavors".¹¹⁰ So, to what extent did the American strategic culture, in combination with the American state-society relations and the domestic political institutions, impact Trump's China policy after the first impressions had been shaped?

As explained in the previous chapter, it often argued that the corporate community would be the most significant interest group in the US. And traditionally, this corporate community would also have a globalist outlook on foreign policy issues. Consequently, the US government and its policies would be biased towards globalist corporate interests. This includes America's China policy, leading to a policy that aimed to maintain access to and control over market and commercial sea lanes of the Asian region.¹¹¹ However, with Trump becoming president, it became less clear if the interests and world views of the traditional domestic elite would continue to dominate the America's China policy.

¹⁰⁷ Nick Bisley, "Security policy in Asia from Obama to Trump. Autopilot, neglect or worse?," in Oliver Turner and Inderjeet Parmar, *The United States in the Indo-Pacific* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), 161-176 there 167.

¹⁰⁸ Ripsman et al., *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics*, 93.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Kai He, "Explaining United States-China Relations: Neoclassical Realism and the Nexus of Threat-Interest Perceptions," *The Pacific Review* 30, no. 2 (2017): 133-51, there 146.

It can be complex to analyze the impact of interest groups due to large degree of confidentiality and unclarity about the decision-making processes in a state's government, especially in the case of the Trump administration because of the many fluctuations in the administration's personnel. Nevertheless, researchers have been able to present data about the American state-society relations during the Trump administration. For example, social scientists Nana de Graaff and Bastiaan van Apeldoorn have analyzed the nature of the elite networks of Trump's top foreign policy makers at the start of his presidency. Their research showed that only a few administration positions related to foreign policy were given to individuals who could be considered part of the Washington establishment or to people who had affiliations with important think tanks.¹¹² However, their research also showed that approximately 80 percent of Trump's top foreign policy-makers had prior corporate affiliations, which is more than the three predeceasing administrations. Of those top foreign policy-makers with prior corporate affiliations, more than 50 percent came from generally transnationally oriented sectors and large companies, which is similar to the predeceasing presidential administrations.¹¹³ Nonetheless, de Graaff and van Apeldoorn also noted that the other half of Trump's top foreign policy-makers had more diverse and unconventional corporate affiliations than usual, leading to more cross-sectoral interests.¹¹⁴ As a result, Trump's foreign policy elite represented both transnational and national corporate interests, whereas the foreign policy elite of the former administrations mostly represented transnational interests.

This argument is well reflected in the literature that discusses the tense relationships between Trump's staff members. It is often said that the Trump administration was divided into two groups regarding its views on foreign policy issues, especially regarding economic issues.¹¹⁵ On the one hand, there would have been a 'globalist faction' which was initially represented by the director of the National Economic Council Gary Cohn. Other examples of staff members who were considered to be part of this faction as well were Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue, Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, and national intelligence Dan Coats.¹¹⁶ This faction was in favor of strong military and economic engagement in the Asian-Pacific region as a strategy to counter China's rise. Therefore, this

¹¹² De Graaff and van Apeldoorn, "The Transnationalist US Foreign-policy Elite in Exile?," 7.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 12-15.

¹¹⁵ See for example Shawn Donnan and Demetri Sevastopulo, "White House civil war breaks out over trade," *Financial Times*, March 10, 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/badd42ce-05b8-11e7-ace0-1ce02ef0def9> or David Lawder, "Bannon departure tips trade scales in favor of White House 'globalists'," *Reuters*, August 19, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-trade-analysis-idUSKCN1AY2IG>.

¹¹⁶ Donnan and Sevastopulo, "White House civil war breaks out over trade," Lawder, "Bannon departure tips trade scales in favor of White House 'globalists'," and Bob Woodward, *Fear* (New York: Simon& Schuster, 2018).

faction favored (multilateral) free-trade agreements such as the TPP and close cooperation with traditional American allies such as Japan, Australia, and South-Korea. Moreover, they were against imposing tariffs on Chinese goods for they feared Chinese retaliation. In general, it could thus be argued that this faction wanted to continue the traditional American strategic culture.

On the other hand, there would have been a typical 'America First faction' which was initially represented by former chief strategist Steve Bannon and Trump's chief trade advisor Peter Navarro.¹¹⁷ This group was in favor a strong anti-China stance over currency manipulation, tariffs, and other trade issues. Furthermore, they pleaded for a decrease of military involvement in the Asia-Pacific region and demanded more equal burden sharing between the US and its allies. In short, this faction supported Trump's election rhetoric that heavily criticized the traditional American strategic culture. Both Steve Bannon and Peter Navarro had a noteworthy influence on Trump's China Policy. Steve Bannon was Trump's strongest advocate for calling China a currency manipulator.¹¹⁸ Peter Navarro is considered Trump's strongest ally on the issue of trade deficits and imposing tariffs on Chinese goods. Being one of the few economists who fiercely rejects trade deficits, Navarro was hired to provide the president with the academic evidence that confirmed Trump's distrust of free trade agreements.¹¹⁹ Navarro's core argument was that trade deficits increased the abilities of foreign actors (such China) to control American companies and industries at the expense of the national security.¹²⁰

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the American political institution which could significantly determine the decision-making process of Trump's China policy is the Congress. However, similarly to the Trump administration itself, the Congress was very divided on the economic aspects of Trump's China policy. Interestingly, studies have shown that members of the Republican party used to be advocates of free trade agreements, whereas the Democratic party often promoted more protectionist trade policies.¹²¹ For example, in designing the TPP deal, President Obama received significantly got more support from Republican members than from his own party members.¹²² Nevertheless, the Republican members of Congress were more supportive of Trump's mercantilist policies related to China than the Democratic ones. In

¹¹⁷ Lawder, "Bannon departure tips trade scales in favor of White House 'globalists'."

¹¹⁸ Woodward, *Fear*, 249 and 323.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 160.

¹²⁰ Peter Navarro, "Why the White House Worries About Trade Deficits," *The Wall Street Journal*, March 5, 2017, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/why-the-white-house-worries-about-trade-deficits-1488751930>

¹²¹ Wang, "Understanding Trump's Trade Policy with China: International Pressures Meet Domestic Politics," 381.

¹²² Seung Min Kim, "13 Senate Dems vote with GOP to advance trade bill," *Politico*, June 23, 2015, <https://www.politico.com/story/2015/06/tpa-trade-bill-democrat-vote-tally-119331>

August 2019, Pew Research Centre showed that 49 percent of the Republican party members and voters supported a continuation of the US trade tariffs on Chinese goods compared to 36 percent of the Democratic party members and voters.¹²³ Pew Research Centre also showed that many Americans do not necessarily think that China's growing economy is bad, as 50 percent still thinks that China's growing economy is good for the US as well.¹²⁴

Despite the fact that there were many Republican congress members who did not agree with Trump's trade war, few made public objections against the president's economic suggestions.¹²⁵ It is argued by scholars that the main reasons for this support were the relative popularity of Trump's economic ideas among American voters and his willingness to retaliate against opponents.¹²⁶ Indeed, Republican politicians who altered their attitude towards free trade agreements in favor of Trump's tariff policy, have performed better in the mid-term elections of 2018 than those who did not.¹²⁷ In addition, the increased American political division during the Trump era also greatly contributed to Congress' decreased ability to prevent the president from acting freely. According to Pew Research Centre, the divisions between Republicans and Democrats on fundamental political values grown wider under the Trump administration than they already were under the Obama administration.¹²⁸ As a result of this increased partisan polarization, political leaders have become more inclined to officially favor extreme policies above moderate ones.

Interestingly, the Congress was united in its support for the administration's security strategy on China and even motivated to the administration to put more pressure on China regarding human rights issues. In the last two years there has been a much congressional activity related to China policy issues. For instance, the Congress approved bills and authorized funds that increased spending related to advancing the capabilities of the US military in the Asia Pacific region and strengthening the domestic security infrastructure against Chinese espionage and influence campaigns.¹²⁹ Furthermore, Congress pressured Trump to impose sanctions against Chinese government officials responsible for the Uyghur detention camps and human rights violations in Hong Kong.

¹²³ "U.S. Views of China Turn Sharply Negative Amid Trade Tensions," *Pew Research Center*, August 23, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2019/08/13/u-s-views-of-china-turn-sharply-negative-amid-trade-tensions/>

¹²⁴ "U.S. Views of China Turn Sharply Negative Amid Trade Tensions."

¹²⁵ Robert Sutter, "Congress and Trump Administration China Policy: Overlapping Priorities, Uneasy Adjustments and Hardening toward Beijing," *The Journal of Contemporary China* 28, no. 118 (2019): 519-37, there 526.

¹²⁶ Sutter, "Congress and Trump Administration China Policy," 535.

¹²⁷ Wang, "Understanding Trump's trade policy with China," 396.

¹²⁸ "The Partisan Divide on Political Values Grows Even Wider," *Pew Research Center*, October 5, 2017, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2017/10/05/the-partisan-divide-on-political-values-grows-even-wider/>

¹²⁹ Scott Kennedy, "Thunder out of Congress on China," *Center for strategic & international studies*, September 11, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/blogs/trustee-china-hand/thunder-out-congress-china>

The unusual unity of the Congress can be explained by its representation of the increasingly negative American image of China. As shown by the Pew Research Centre in September 2019, 60 percent of Americans had an unfavorable opinion of China, compared to 47 percent in 2018.¹³⁰ Americans' concern was mostly focused on China's increasing military strength, as 81 percent of the American population thought that China's growing military power was bad for the US.¹³¹ In addition, about three-quarter of the American would think that the US should promote human rights in China, even if this could harm economic relations between the two states.¹³² Given that the American strategic culture prescribes that the US should protect its interests through material strength when threatened by a foreign rival, it is understandable that many Americans were in favor of a tougher security approach towards China.

The Implementation Process

As explained Ripsman et al., the implementation process is the third and last policy phase in which resources are mobilized in order to carry out the earlier made policy decisions, thus leading to actual foreign policy responses. For the implementation of a foreign policy, foreign policy executives are conditioned domestically by the state's strategic culture, the state-society relations, and the domestic political institutions. The question that arises is, to what extent did the Trump administration to implement its leaders' perceptions and decisions regarding an appropriate China policy?

One way to look at the implementation of Trump's China policy, is to examine the official documents that promoted the strategic outlook and general guideline of the Trump administration, such as the National Security Strategy of 2017. Compared to the National Security Strategy of 2015, this new strategy had a more assertive tone towards China. In the National Security Strategy of the Obama administration, the importance of a cooperative bilateral relationship was clearly emphasized by stating that the US welcomed "the rise of a stable, peaceful, and prosperous China" and sought "to develop a constructive relationship with China that delivers benefits for our two peoples and promotes security and prosperity in Asia and around the world".¹³³ While the Trump administration mentions its willingness to cooperate with China, it suggests that this cooperation will rather result from America's position of

¹³⁰ "U.S. Views of China Turn Sharply Negative Amid Trade Tensions."

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Jacob Poushter and Moira Fagan, "Foreign policy experts in the U.S. have much different views about threats to the country than the general public," *Pew Research Center*, October 23, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/10/23/foreign-policy-experts-in-the-u-s-have-much-different-views-about-threats-to-the-country-than-the-general-public/>

¹³³ "National Security Strategy of the United States of America 2015," *The White House*, February 2015, 24, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2015_national_security_strategy_2.pdf.

strength than from China's liberalization. For instance, the administration rejected the "belief that support for China's rise and its integration into the post-war international order would liberalize China" for "contrary to our hopes, China expanded its power at the expense of the sovereignty of others".¹³⁴

To counter China's challenges to America's security and prosperity, the document's first chapter is dedicated to the administration's ambition to enhance the America's military capabilities. The second chapter of the document talks about the protection of America's economic security. Interestingly, China is only explicitly mentioned here when referring to theft of American intellectual property.¹³⁵ This chapter thus does not suggest that the Trump administration was in favor of imposing tariffs.

In addition to the National Security Strategy, the later published National Defense Strategy, issued by the US Department of Defense, further elaborated on the administration's strategic stance towards China. This document stated that "long-term strategic competitions with China [...] are the principal priorities for the Department" which "require both increased and sustained investment, because of the magnitude of the threats [it] pose[s] to U.S. security and prosperity today, and the potential for those threats to increase in the future."¹³⁶ Thus, when looking at the security aspects of the administration's official China approach, it stands out that it views the US-China relationship as zero-sum game and that it wants to act upon this by increasing its competitiveness.

Reading National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy, one might argue that the globalist faction succeed in pushing through a policy that suited its worldview for they emphasize all four features of the traditional American grand strategy. For instance, the documents advocate for a continuation of America's primacy by enhancing the state's military capabilities and presence in vital regions in the world. This is interesting, considering that Trump election promise was to reduce foreign military interventions. Also, while the document does name Trump's desire that allies should have a greater share of the responsibility to protect the world from common threats, this point does not come back as often as the reassuring comments about supporting American allies.¹³⁷

¹³⁴ "National Security Strategy of the United States of America 2017," *The White House*, December 2017, 25, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

¹³⁵ "National Security Strategy of the United States of America 2017," 21.

¹³⁶ "Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of American," *US Department of Defense*, January 2018, 4, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>.

¹³⁷ The document for example mentioned that the US remained committed to Article V of NATO and countering nuclear proliferation, and it also stated that the US would continue to play a leading role in the multilateral institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, World Bank and World Trade Organization, see "National Security Strategy of the United States of America 2017," 40 and 48.

Nevertheless, it needs to be stressed here that President Trump regularly ignored or distrusted suggestions from his close advisors, especially regarding economic issues. The books of journalist Bob Woodward 'Fear' and 'Rage' for example describes numerous dialogues in which Trump entirely neglects the advice of his staff members on the issue of trade, despite their great commitment to convince him otherwise.¹³⁸ Trump's director of national intelligence Dan Coats, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis all expressed that they were against placing tariffs on Chinese goods for this would hurt the bilateral relationship and raise the prices for American consumers too.¹³⁹ Obviously, Trump's trade war with China shows that the President did not listen to their advice. Furthermore, all three staff members advised Trump to maintain strong economic and security alliances with America's traditional Asian-Pacific partners in order to counter China's strength.¹⁴⁰ Trump regularly criticized their commitments to these alliances, saying that his advisors were "a bunch of pussies [who] care more about their alliances than they do about trade deals".¹⁴¹ In addition, Trump replaced many top foreign policy advisors who disagreed with his views, such as National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster, Jim Mattis and Rex Tillerson.¹⁴² As a result, it remained unpredictable to what extent Trump's foreign policy elite could really influence the president's foreign policy responses.

Looking at Trump's actual policy responses, it can be argued that the Trump administration was not consistently hardline. On the one hand, it pursued a hawkish China policy. It started a bilateral trade war and Trump openly accused China of causing and spreading the COVID-19 virus. Furthermore, the administration has taken many steps to shut down perceived Chinese espionage and influence activities in the US. Chinese state-run media outlets and the Confucius Institute U.S. Center were designated as foreign interference tools, which resulted in the requirement of detailed disclosures of their personnel and property to the US State Department.¹⁴³ In addition, Trump approved plans to increase US freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea to counter China's aggressive expansion in that area.¹⁴⁴ For

¹³⁸ Bob Woodward's books are based on many interviews with firsthand witnesses as well as real notes, emails and confidential documents from inside the Trump administration, see Martin Pengelly, "Bob Woodward obtains letters between Trump and Kim Jong-un for new book Rage," *The Guardian*, August 12, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/aug/12/bob-woodward-donald-trump-book-rage-kim-jong-un>.

¹³⁹ For information about the disagreement with Tillerson see Woodward, *Fear*, 179. For the disagreement with Cohn see *Ibid.*, 161. And for the situation with Mattis see Bob Woodward, *Rage* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020) 57-58.

¹⁴⁰ Woodward, *Rage*, 24.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 59.

¹⁴² Jack Detsch and Robbies Gramer, "Pentagon Purges Leading Advisors from Defense Policy Board," *Foreign Policy*, November 25, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/11/25/pentagon-purges-leading-advisors-from-defense-policy-board/>.

¹⁴³ Bonnie Girard, "From the Deal to Decoupling: Trump's Evolution on China," *The Diplomat*, September 17, 2020 <https://thediplomat.com/2020/09/from-the-deal-to-decoupling-trumps-evolution-on-china/>

¹⁴⁴ Porter, "Why America's Grand Strategy Has Not Changed," 35.

all these issues, Trump was supported by the Congress. This was especially the case with security measures, such as the passing of the Foreign Investment Risk Review Modernization Act and the Export Control Reform Act, which both tightened the rules related to foreign investment screening and exports of sensitive technologies.¹⁴⁵

But on the other hand, Trump actively tried to evade tensions with China by maintaining close contact with the Chinese president Xi and showing little interest in China's human rights violations.¹⁴⁶ Even more interesting, while Trump had often favored strong sanctions against Chinese companies to protect the national security, this approach was not always consistent either. For example, Trump's former national security advisor John Bolton claimed that the president ended sanctions against the Chinese telecommunication company ZTE to favor the president Xi.¹⁴⁷ Furthermore, Trump would have offered to end sanctions against Huawei in exchange for trade concessions.¹⁴⁸ These points again show that Trump's interest in trade issues is prioritized above other China policy priorities. However, Trump was not always able to act upon his perception as the Congress induced the administration to impose sanctions on China over the Hong Kong national security law and the detention and persecution of Uyghurs.¹⁴⁹

It should be noted that the US largely continued Obama's security approach towards the Asia-Pacific region. For instance, the Trump administration would enhance its military strength in the region by deploying the US Thermal High-Altitude Area Defense anti-missile system in South Korea and it would pressure North Korea to halt its development of nuclear weapons. Also, while it is true that Trump's frequent blunt tweets and public statements continued to cause tensions with foreign partners, the president also established closer contact with the political leaders of North Korea, The Philippines, Malaysia, and Thailand, who were previously shunned by the American government because of concerns over corruption, human rights violations and the autocratic regimes.¹⁵⁰ Furthermore, Trump's diplomatic appointees explicitly reassured Asian states of America's alliance commitments.¹⁵¹ Trump's rhetorical pressure on North Korea is often considered the only significant differences between Trump's Asia policy

¹⁴⁵ Kennedy, "Thunder out of Congress on China."

¹⁴⁶ Edward Wong and Michael Crowley, "The Biggest Obstacle to China Policy: President Trump," *The New York Times*, June 18, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/18/us/politics/trump-china-bolton.html>.

¹⁴⁷ Henry Farrell, "Bolton alleges that Trump helped out China's leader on ZTE. What's ZTE?," *The Washington Post*, January 28, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/01/28/bolton-alleges-that-trump-helped-out-chinas-leader-zte-whats-zte/>.

¹⁴⁸ Wong and Crowley, "The Biggest Obstacle to China Policy."

¹⁴⁹ "Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act of 2020," *Congress*, June 17, 2020, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/senate-bill/3744>.

¹⁵⁰ Sutter, "Congress and Trump Administration China Policy," 529.

¹⁵¹ See for example "Vice President Pence Visits South Korea, Reaffirms United States' Ironclad Commitment," *US Department of State*, April 18, 2017, <https://www.state.gov/vice-president-pence-visits-south-korea-reaffirms-united-states-ironclad-commitment/>

and the policy of the Obama administration.¹⁵² In other words, the security approach of Trump administration towards the Asia-Pacific region largely continued the values of America's strategic culture.

Concluding Remarks

The analysis of chapter has shown how Trump's China policy can be explained by a Neoclassical Realist framework. The Neoclassical Realist framework of this paper suggested that the interaction between the four domestic variables, Trump's leader images, America's strategic culture, the American state-society relations, and the domestic political institutions, would affect the three policy processes of perception, decision-making and implementation.

Concerning the perception process, it was argued that Trump understood China's economic rise as the greatest threat to the sovereignty and primacy of the US whereas he cared less about China's human rights violations or military build-up. Therefore, he wanted to counter the China's economic strength through a policy that put much pressure on China via tariffs and new trade negotiations. It was also argued that Trump's perception on economic issues differed from America's strategic culture or traditional grand strategy, which used to stimulate strong economic cooperation with China. However, Trump's perception regarding the security aspects of America's China or Asia-Pacific policy only differentiated from the strategic culture in scenario's when he perceived that the traditional security strategy undermined America's economic interests

The decision-making process proved to be in favor of Trump's economic perception whereas this was not necessarily the case on non-economic issues. This can be explained by the fact that both Trump's foreign policy staff and the Congress were very divided on economic foreign policy issues. The dividedness within Trump's foreign policy team resulted from the varied corporate backgrounds of the staff members, whereas the dividedness of the Congress can be explained by the popularity of Trump's economic proposals among American voters and the political polarization between the Republican and the Democratic party. Furthermore, Trump's willingness to retaliate against those who disagreed with him, might also have motivated both congress members and staff members to hide their criticism on the president's trade obsession. While America's strategic culture used to stimulate the promotion of multilateral free trade agreements and close economic cooperation with China, the dividedness of the American society now decreased the impact of this variable. However, on security and

¹⁵² Bisley, "Security policy in Asia from Obama to Trump", 167.

human rights issues, there was considerable unity among the American public and Congress members which led to congressional activity related to these policy issues.

The implementation process showed that Trump's perceptions on trade prevailed in economic foreign policy responses, such as the withdrawal of the US from the TPP, the trade war with China and the renegotiations of trade agreements. However, this was not the case for Trump's China or Asia policy on security or human rights issues. While Trump personally desired to avoid tensions with China on non-economic matters, his wishes were brushed aside by the increasingly negative public image towards China's military strength, which was again driven by America's strategic culture and enforced by the legislative power of the Congress. In addition, it seems like Trump's globalist foreign policy staff successfully lobbied the president to uphold the features of the traditional grand strategy. As result of these factors, the official documents of the administration in combination with its actions, showed that Trump's policy largely continued the security approach of his predecessor despite Trump's initial promises not to do so.

The General Conclusion

The goal of the thesis was to get a better understanding of Trump's foreign policy. In the first chapter, this paper discussed the Jacksonian foreign policy tradition designed by Walter Russell Mead. Mead's Jacksonian tradition is often used to explain both Trump's election victory in 2016 and his foreign policy actions. However, this paper argued that the popular Jacksonian tradition could not offer a satisfying explanation for Trump's foreign policy. Mead's foreign policy traditions could not explain why the Trump administration continued many aspects of Obama's foreign policy, despite Trump's strong critique and promises to change it. It was argued that this problem was caused by the absence of an analytical framework and methodology. In addition, Mead's traditions do not carefully consider the causal mechanisms laid out by theories of international relations and they therefore ignore important but less obvious factors of influence. To solve the shortcomings of Mead's traditions and offer a better explanation of Trump's foreign policy, this paper suggested to look at Trump's foreign policy from a Neoclassical Realist perspective.

The hypothesis of this thesis was that a Neoclassical Realist approach could give a more comprehensive understanding of Trump's foreign policy than the Jacksonian tradition for Neoclassical Realist approaches are based on causation models that implement domestic, systemic and agency factors. To test this hypothesis, this thesis adopted the Neoclassical Realist framework of Ripsman et al. to analyze Trump's foreign policy. The variables that were used within this framework were: Trump's perception of international affairs and America's position in the global system, America's strategic culture and traditional grand strategy, America's state-society relations and America's political institutions. After a general analysis of these variables, a case study of Trump's China policy was used to examine the interaction of the four intervening variables in the three policy processes in greater depth.

The case on Trump's China policy showed that the four domestic variables did not equally influence the policy processes. In situations when the state-society relations were competitive and the domestic political institutions allowed the executive power greater policy autonomy, such as Trump's trade policy towards China, the leader images variable prevailed. However, in situations when the state-society relations were less competitive and the domestic political institutions did not allow the executive power complete policy autonomy, such as Trump's security and human rights policy towards China, the leader images variable was less deciding. The variable of the strategic culture was always present, for it highly influenced the American public opinion on all policy issues related to China. However, this variable was most

influential when state-society relations and the domestic political institutions were aligned with it.

As a result of a general analysis of Trump's foreign policy in chapter three and the more specific case study of Trump's China policy in chapter four, it became clear that Ripsman's et al. Neoclassical Realist framework can offer a valuable insights of the causal mechanisms that shaped Trump's foreign policy. As a result of this, Ripsman's et al. framework can explain why Trump was not consistently hawkish towards China or why the Trump administration would not abandon America's alliances or foreign interventions, whereas the Mead's Jacksonian tradition is not able to illustrate these nuances. Ripsman's et al. Neoclassical Realist framework can thus indeed give us a better understanding of the complex processes than the Mead's foreign policy traditions that entirely lack an analytical framework. Nevertheless, some caveats need to be made on Ripsman's et al. Neoclassical Realist framework.

First, there seems to be a demarcation weakness. Ripsman's et al. did try to demarcate their framework by choosing only four variable clusters and the three intervening level processes that help to narrow the selection of variables. But when putting the framework into action, these variables clusters still seem too broad as the authors did not outline four specific variables. As a result, the user of the framework is still free to choose various combinations of variables that might not capture all the characteristics of a state's foreign policy. Furthermore, it is still unclear how the Neoclassical Realist framework fits into the range of International Relations theories. The authors explicitly emphasize the importance of structure of the international system in influencing foreign policy decisions, but when analyzing the domestic variables and a state's foreign policy processes it becomes tempting to neglect a careful analysis of the complex systemic stimuli. In addition, because the framework suggests an analysis of constructivist-informed variables, such as the perception of individual leaders and national norms laid out by a strategic culture, it is unclear to what extent the Neoclassical Realist framework can still be considered part of the Realist theoretical family.

To sum up, a Neoclassical Realism does offer a more comprehensive explanation for Trump's foreign policy than Mead's Jacksonian tradition does, for it shows the importance of using a causal model to understand complex foreign policy processes. But, in order ensure that Neoclassical Realism can become more significant in future studies of foreign policy, more rigorous empirical research needs to be done.

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