**Unpredictability as Doctrine:**

**Reconceptualising Foreign Policy Strategy in the Trump Era**

*This article tackles the question of whether US President Donald Trump’s foreign policy is informed by doctrine and, if so, what that doctrine entails. In doing so, the study positions itself with those who argue for the presence of a doctrine and specifically those who argue for a doctrine of unpredictability. Exploring Trump’s conceptualisation of unpredictability, the article makes three related arguments. First, that Trump expresses unpredictability as an intentional and deliberate act of doctrine. Second, that unpredictability can be explained through an original four-pronged model, consisting of: inconstancy, inconsistency, unconstrainedness, and unreliability. Third, the article problematises current understandings of foreign policy doctrine – arguing that a conceptual tendency to rely on the rational decision-making model constitutes a hindrance to analysis by precluding the possibility of a fluid doctrine premised on a strategy of obfuscation and unexpectedness to both friend and foe.*

In terms of international political actors, United States (US) presidents are those most subject to questions about the nature of their foreign policy doctrine – with analysts seeking to identify the ideological and conceptual tenets that drive a president’s particular approach. The 45th incumbent of the White House has divided debate on this issue, such that the question of whether President Donald Trump has established a foreign policy doctrine – and, if so, what that doctrine comprises – remains contested. Existing analysis falls into one of two categories: those who argue for the absence of a ‘Trump Doctrine’ and those who identify a deliberate and intentional grand vision of foreign policy, albeit with the latter category further divided in terms of what precisely that doctrine entails. This article aligns itself, first, with the existing body of literature on ‘doctrine’, extensive in relation to the US context particularly, and, second, with a specific group within this latter category – those who argue for (what is termed) a ‘doctrine of unpredictability.’ The aim of the article is not simply, however, to strengthen the latter part of this debate over the absence or presence of doctrine in Trump’s foreign policy, but grapples with the notion that there is an identifiable strategic expression and one that can be associated with a specific type of unpredictability in respect to the formulation of foreign policy.

The current debate on the conceptual basis of Trump’s foreign policy – and, more explicitly, the identification of unpredictability as a form of doctrine – raises two key issues that this article will address. First, that the present discussion has yet to a) define clearly and fully what unpredictability entails and means within the context of a foreign policy worldview and/or b) erroneously equates unpredictability with unrestrained erraticism. To address this gap, the article proposes a significantly more detailed and original four-pronged model of unpredictability, based on: inconstancy, inconsistency, unconstrainedness, and unreliability. Critically, the identification of this model is not intended to excuse Trump’s foreign policy actions (by legitimising his approach or implying that it is appropriate or successful), to imply that Trump is not inherently erratic as a political actor, or to make him out to be some ‘evil genius’. Nor does this article dismiss those who characterise Trump’s foreign policy as based in realist thought and transactionalism (e.g. Schweller 2017) – where it will be shown that this is not incompatible with unpredictability as a form of doctrine. Furthermore, this article is primarily concerned with the expression and formulation of doctrine more than its realisation. In rejecting the idea that Trump is entirely incapable of constructing doctrine as a consequence of his haphazard character, this is not to argue that erraticism does not influence his decision-making per se. Whether Trump is *successful* in terms of doctrine is not the core question posed here (indeed, this article argues that ‘success’ in realisation is a poor measure as to whether doctrine can be identified). Instead, the study provides an important means for comprehending Trump’s expressed construction of foreign policy and the factors that drive it. In analysing Trump’s professed commitment to unpredictability as a means of foreign policymaking in public statements, this article demonstrates that the president has intentionally outlined a worldview that can be identified as doctrine.

The second issue that this article seeks to address concerns the ways in which this binary debate has evaded the complexity of what it means to identify a ‘Trump Doctrine’, to the extent that analysis so far fundamentally overlooks and/or misunderstands the ways in which Trump has formulated and adopted a doctrinal approach. The article offers explanations for this that centre on the idea that Trump’s approach does not reflect more traditional notions of what a foreign policy doctrine typically comprises. Issues relating to understanding emerge because the debate is reliant on established ideas that preclude proper problematisation of unpredictability as doctrine. Furthermore, the debate does not provide the vocabulary and theoretical tools to do so. In contrast, and in advancing the claim that Trump has adopted a doctrine and that this doctrine is based on unpredictability, this article seeks to avoid falling into either of the twin camps of supporters or detractors of Trump’s foreign policy that Jon Herbert et al. (2019) rightly identify and instead to construct a conceptual framework that entertains the possibility that Trump, or indeed any other leader, might seek to escape the confines of accepted foreign policy convention to build a doctrine built on a determination to be deliberately unpredictable. In making such an argument, the article aligns itself with the arguments already made that Trump has adopted a doctrine of unpredictability; yet it also makes an important contribution to that debate by conceptualising unpredictability (as a doctrine) itself. The study therefore institutes a conceptual toolbox that allows analysis to escape the supporter-detractor divide in the particular case of Trump, but which is more widely generalisable in that it questions whether a rethinking of our foreign policy vocabulary is needed and whether some base assumptions require fresh interrogation. In asking whether Trump’s foreign policy follows a doctrine of unpredictability, therefore, this study offers a vehicle for asking a bigger question about the fit between current-day analysis of foreign policy and the current context in which that analysis is conducted.

One final prefatory point is worth making. Understanding unpredictability matters in a world where security actors are preparing for a more unpredictable world. NATO’s 2019 report on how the organisation was ‘adapting to an unpredictable security environment’ (NATO 2019) understandably made no mention of the ways any of its members were themselves contributing to the unpredictable environment. But the silence on this spoke volumes about the likely failures of an adaptation that was lacking in such reflexive thinking. Space must be made for consideration of the possibility that the unpredictable world is being made more unpredictable from within and for the possibility that western actors are as prone to the unpredictable as any other actor.

**Unpredictability as Doctrine**

While the very concept of foreign policy ‘doctrine’ is inherently contested and unclear (Dumbrell 2002: 44), this can be understood as a type of worldview (if not always a type of grand strategy) whereby this consists of ‘a publicly expressed set of statements regarding the constitution of the international system, the own state’s role within that system, and how the system and the state are subjected to a threat’ (Sjostedt 2007: 235). From such doctrine, analysis can identify a set of values and expectations that – at least ostensibly – drive a specific president in respect of foreign policymaking according to certain ideological expectations that they hold. The intentionality and strategy inherent to the idea of a clear and cogent expression of foreign action has seen some analysts reject the claim that Trump has a doctrine. It is argued that Trump and his administration have consistently failed to articulate a coherent and transparent worldview (e.g. Sa 2016: 1), i.e. that there is an absence of doctrine. This rejection is typically premised on perceptions of Trump’s erratic character and lack of political expertise. Widely regarded as the ‘wild card’ of both domestic and international politics (Edsall 2016), it would be easy to assume that Trump is not interested in, or sufficiently capable of playing architect to, a consistent foreign policy vision. One notable engagement with reasons for why Trump may not have a doctrine, which does not rely on assessment of his character, builds on wider arguments about the impossibility of having ‘developed a “doctrine” or—more expansively—a “grand strategy”’ given the twenty-first century context (Dombrowski and Reich, 2017: 2).

Other analysts, however, do identify evidence of a Trumpian foreign policy doctrine (Haines 2017: 131) – albeit subject to a dispute as to what this doctrine actually comprises. The identification of a Trump doctrine has often been associated with an isolationist ‘America First’ or Jacksonian stance (Cha 2017; Clarke and Ricketts 2017). For others, doctrine is imposed by continuities rooted in a more contemporary context, whereby Trump has effectively been forced into adopting the doctrinal approaches of his predecessors – not least a consequence of the War on Terror’s on-going legacy (Addicott 2018). Others focused less on doctrine than on outcomes support such arguments. Herbert et al. (2019), for instance, arguing that Trump’s attempts to break with foreign policy convention have been stymied by party, congressional, and other structural barriers. There is yet a further group of analysts (the primary focus of this article): those who identify Trump’s worldview as the ‘doctrine of unpredictability’ (Fuchs 2017). This specific conceptualisation of doctrine expresses the claim that Trump is intrinsically and deliberately unpredictable in respect to foreign policy decision-making. Far from the typical constancy often associated with foreign policy doctrine, Trump’s ‘rule’ – or pattern of behaviour – is to be as variable and arbitrary as possible: never let them know what you will do.

At this point it would be easy to revert to the position of those who reject the idea that Trump possesses a foreign policy doctrine; more specifically, that any unpredictability in respect of foreign policy is simply the consequence of Trump’s known erraticism – as opposed to the product of a deliberate and intentional political strategy. If foreign policy is unpredictable, this is simply a case of Trump being Trump. Such an approach, however, overlooks the ways in which Trump has repeatedly articulated the idea of unpredictability as the basis of foreign policy, such that it constitutes an expression of worldview and, therefore, of doctrine. Such expression was a key aspect of his 2016 election campaign, where Trump repeatedly asserted the need for an unpredictable foreign policy. For example, in his major foreign policy address of the campaign (Trump 2016), he said:

We must as a nation be more unpredictable. We are totally predictable. We tell everything. We’re sending troops. We tell them. We’re sending something else. We have a news conference. We have to be unpredictable. And we have to be unpredictable starting now.

In another example, where Trump had been asked what he would do as US President if China were to ‘accidentally or intentionally sink a Filipino or Japanese ship,’ he replied:

I wouldn’t want to tell you, because frankly, they have to, you know, somebody wrote a very good story about me recently, and they said there’s a certain unpredictable, and it was actually another businessman, said there’s a certain unpredictability about Trump that’s great, and it’s what made him a lot of money and a lot of success. You don’t want to put [sic], and you don’t want to let people know what you’re going to do with respect to certain things that happen. You don’t want the other side to know.

(in Hewitt 2015)

Critically, Trump espoused the idea of unpredictability specifically in preference to (what he saw as) the weakness inherent to his predecessors’ more ‘predictable’ approach. As the then-presidential candidate told *The Washington Post* Editorial Board during the election campaign: ‘We’re totally predictable. And predictable is bad’ (Post Opinions Staff 2016). Within this context of foreign policy, Trump has repeatedly treated unpredictability as a ‘virtue’ in respect to international politics (Haines 2017: 136) and has publicly and consistently expressed a commitment to unpredictability as a key tenet of his approach to foreign policy-making. The unpredictable foreign policy actor is the successful one; the one you never saw coming. Consequently, there is clear evidence of intentionality on Trump’s part in respect to doctrine.

***Unpredictability v erraticism***

Before addressing in greater depth what ‘unpredictability’ is, it is first important to address the semantics of what it is not. Current debate tends to reduce unpredictability to ‘haphazard’ behaviour – explicitly, Trump’s erratic and frequently controversial actions (Beauchamp 2017). Trump’s approach is described as ‘a freewheeling operation’ (Biddle in Bertrand 2017), that is ‘impulsive, ad hoc and incompetent’ (Glaser, Preble, and Thrall 2019: 25) and in which ‘chaos rules’ (Dombrowski and Reich 2018: 57). Rebecca Friedman Lissner and Mira Rapp-Hooper (2018: 7) also comment, ‘the Trump administration revealed a team too riddled with chaos to execute any grand-strategic vision’. Jeffrey Goldberg (2018) puts the case even more bluntly: ‘Many of Donald Trump’s critics find it difficult to ascribe to a president they consider to be both subliterate and historically insensate a foreign-policy doctrine that approaches coherence’. While Goldberg does accept that Trump has become more ideologically developed during his time in the White House, he still refers to current US foreign policy as a case of ‘Trumpian chaos’. Consequently, unpredictability has come to be directly associated with unrestrained and unguided erraticism. In addition, Trump has been repeatedly criticised for his personality and leadership style generally. For example, in an open letter on March 2 2016, GOP national leaders said: ‘His vision of American influence and power in the world is wildly inconsistent and unmoored in principle. He swings from isolationism to military adventurism within the space of one sentence’ (WOTR Staff 2016). In a similar vein, a 2017 *Los Angeles Times* editorial commented:

He is a man so unpredictable, so reckless, so petulant, so full of blind self-regard, so un-tethered to the reality that it is impossible to know where his presidency will lead or how much damage he will do to our nation… Although his policies are, for the most part, variations on classic Republican positions… they have become far more dangerous in the hands of this imprudent and erratic man.

(The Times Editorial Board 2017)

Crucially, this article does not dispute that Trump *is* inherently erratic in terms of his personality and leadership style – whether that erraticism is identified as doctrinal or otherwise. Indeed, for those engaged on Twitter, much could be said about the unpredictable nature of Trump; first that the president *will* tweet (an act that, in itself, is seen as controversial, untraditional and divisive), and second *how* he will do so (discussed in greater depth later in this article). A distinction can be drawn, however, between unpredictability as intentionally creating a situation in which the other does not know what you will do and haphazardness as pure erraticism. Unpredictability as doctrine is not simply chaos, such that analysts would do well to consider the ‘method in the madness’ associated with Trump’s more unpredictable moments.

To strongly reiterate, this statement is not to claim that Trump is not haphazard or that the consequences of his foreign policy actions are immune from such critiques. While Trump can be viewed as a novice outsider, one who was not previously part of the international relations community, failing to conceptualise unpredictability in this way means the debate has not engaged with the idea that he may still have the capacity to construct doctrine.

Within this wider context, it is unsurprising that Trump would be criticised for his irregular approach. In discussing this further, it should be remembered that – to a large degree – predictability and, therefore (even if only indirectly), unpredictability are built into foreign policy in ways that do not apply to domestic policy areas. Robert Putnam’s (1988) two-level game argument, powerfully, even if narrowly in today’s international arena, illustrating the dual – domestic and international - environments in which foreign policy is made, provides a good space for understanding why this is the case. It is for this reason that Northedge (1968: 11) speaks of how, ‘foreign policy constitutes an endless dialogue between the powers of continuity and the powers of change’. Foreign policy is further complicated by a negotiation among actors; Hermann (1995: 256) for instance, arguing that ‘the essence of foreign policy’ is ‘a sequence of exchanges’. Equally, foreign policy is characterised by relative power relations – and so is also about the capacity of actor A to adjust and control the behaviour of actor B, meaning it is premised on being able to predict how actor B is likely to behave. As such, the actors involved in these exchanges rely on some prior general understanding of each other. Add to this that local, regional and global stability and security are reliant on responsible decision-making in foreign policy; in other words, that much is at stake, and that it is therefore understandable that where unpredictability in foreign policy is identified, it is largely seen in negative terms. At the same time, the reactive element of foreign policy suggests that there are limits to what can be planned in the mid to long-term; an uncontroversial conclusion considering the gap that often exists between the decision-making and implementation stages that are inherent to policymaking, foreign or otherwise. A certain amount of unpredictability is inescapable, therefore – but, crucially, goes the standard wisdom, can be mitigated by predictable foreign policy-*making*. Consequently, Trump’s approach lies in direct contrast to established and conventional expectations of what foreign policy should seek to achieve (in order to be successful) and how international actors should relate to each other.

***Predictability***

Admittedly, some analysts question whether Trump *is* truly unpredictable in respect of foreign policy decision-making. Elliot Abrams (2017) asserts that – while far from being a conventional president – Trump has pursued ‘a surprisingly standard foreign policy’ and that this has not comprised ‘a revolutionary administration’. Differing little in terms of their evaluation of Trump’s foreign policy outcomes, Herbert et al. (2019) concur, premising their entire book on the notion of Trump as ‘ordinary’ and speaking, in this regard, of necessarily ‘tackl[ing] the conventional wisdom [that Trump’s presidency is unconventional] head-on’ (Herbert et al. 2019: 14). Thomas Wright (2019) similarly claims that Trump’s foreign policy is ‘no longer unpredictable’ and that any incoherence in the early days of the administration was simply the consequence of growing pains between the President and his advisors. Yet there are two issues that need to be addressed in respect of such arguments. First, that delimiting when and what in foreign policy you are analysing is important. Many, if not all, the arguments about conventionality are based on the outcomes from Trump’s foreign policy, versus focusing on the doctrine and its expression. As already alluded to, however, foreign policy analysis does not always bridge the formulation/implementation divide. Indeed, much work centres on the gap between the aims and the achievement of them but that is not necessarily to dismiss the aims as unreflective of what the actor in question actually sought to achieve. If analysis were to hold any president to account for the realisation and consistency of their foreign policy in respect of the ideals they had professed, none would live up to expectation. While Wassim Daghrir (2020) defines doctrine as ‘constant practice of a particular political ideology’ this ignores the way in which no president has ever been entirely consistent in realising their foreign policy doctrine. Complete adherence to a doctrine is not a viable measure of its existence; success perhaps, but not presence.

Second, that aspects of Trump’s foreign policy *are* recognised as unpredictable. Indeed, there is strong evidence that other national leaders and international political figures consider Trump’s foreign policy to be unpredictable in scope and content and that these perceptions also matter. For example, former UN Ambassador Nikki Haley (in Lynch 2017) commented that United Nations (UN) diplomats had openly raised concern that US foreign policy was inherently unpredictable – a situation that she claimed was ‘a good thing’. Similarly, Gerard Araud (in Wainer and Wadhams 2020), former French Ambassador to the UN, commented in relation to the contentious assassination of Iranian Major General Qasem Soleimani:

The Americans are now totally unpredictable. There was no response to Iranian attacks against oil tankers, a U.S. drone and Saudi oil fields, but out of the blue comes this surprising hit on Soleimani. We are depending on the unpredictable reaction of one man.

And as Lithuania’s President Dalia Grybauskaite said: ‘[W]e need leadership sometimes for decision-making, even unpredictable leadership, to make enough leverage and pressure for rivals to believe that we can make a decision. And that’s, we think, this kind of leadership in President Trump’ (govinfo, 2018).

Further evidence has come closer to home: unpredictability evident, for example, in the failure to uphold ‘America First’ as doctrine – where this approach has been associated with the idea of principled realism (essentially a case of ‘putting US interests first’) as a form of doctrinal thinking (Anton 2019). While Trump has repeatedly proclaimed a commitment to ‘America First’ as an international strategy, his administration’s actions do not consistently reflect this. Recognition of this inconsistency has even come from within the administration itself. For example, Mike Dubke, Trump’s Communications Director and top aide, described ‘America First’ as little more than meaningless rhetoric and stated that this could not be considered a valid foreign policy doctrine (Dreazen 2017). To develop Dubke’s claim, aspects of Trump’s foreign policy do conflict with the notion of ‘America First’ – not least the airstrikes against chemical weapons use in Syria. Consequently, ‘America First’ is considered less a strategy and more a ‘platitude’ (Kaine 2017: 37). A phrase such as Make America Great Again ‘certainly communicates a policy of national self-interest and pride, but does not reveal how he [Trump] intends to do such’ (Addicott 2018: 212) – and the same can be said of similar phrases, such as the controversial ‘Transitioning to Greatness’ (N. Goldberg 2020). This situation, therefore, not only represents the inability to identify ‘America First’ as doctrine (versus slogan) – but lays the foundation for the claim of doctrine as unpredictability, where the intentional refusal to commit to a specific line of policy itself represents unpredictability.

**Conceptualising Unpredictability**

If it is accepted that Trump adopts a model that is *deliberately* unpredictable, and that this unpredictability comprises more than erraticism, this opens up the question as to what unpredictability means. The debate on Trump’s doctrinal approach has yet to fully address this. Even for those who do accept that unpredictability can comprise doctrine, however, there has been no *definition* of unpredictability. The debate so far lacks a profound grappling with the idea of unpredictability as a concept versus a description. Importantly, this conceptual absence is not simply an issue of a lack of definition, but a situation where the notion of unpredictability has been erroneously conflated with certain types of erratic behaviour – and where that conflation further clouds understanding of what unpredictability as doctrine means. Specifically, in contrast to a view of unpredictability as chaos, this study identifies four aspects that characterise deliberate unpredictability: inconstancy, inconsistencyunconstrainedness, and unreliability. It should be acknowledged too that, forming as they do, four distinct parts of the single concept (unpredictability), there is inevitably some overlap. For instance, continuity figures in more than one of the four aspects and, therefore, needs unpacking in order to understand the different forms in which continuity can manifest itself.

***Inconstancy***

Despite – perhaps because of – the element of change in international relations, analysis often starts from the idea that states (in our case) exhibit a good deal of continuity. Part of the unpacking of continuity points us to think about continuities in terms of friends, allies, and foes. This is better expressed in terms of constancy and is especially relevant in relation to those states considered friends and allies – where constancy is both a virtue and, if those alliances are to be maintained, a necessity. Thinking about this in terms of the Liberal World Order (LWO) is useful. That order is premised on the notion of a constitutive core: the US as hegemonic and *a*, if not *the*, founding state, but supported (and legitimised) by the Atlantic states in a tight relationship built on a shared value-driven commitment to multilateralism; and by East Asian states built on a set of looser bilateral ties but multilateral economic relations (Ikenberry 2005). While much has been written about the decline of the liberal world order, these relationships have – until the Trump administration – not been regarded as the cause of that decline. Notwithstanding all the criticisms of US foreign policy in its liberal adventurist forms, the US capacity(versus commitment) to defend its friends in the LWO has been the source of most debate in the context of the challenges brought by rising powers, especially China. Under Trump, it is not just the US’s financial (therefore capacity) commitment to the European security guarantee that is in doubt, it is the question of whether the US continues to value its European allies and therefore to commit to them. In other words, valid concerns abound as to whether the US today should be regarded as a constant or an inconstant friend.

The problems associated with *in*constancy can be seen in the – sometimes quite subtle – expressions of concern about the unpredictability of Trump’s foreign policy; and, more specifically, the US President’s failure to articulate a firm view. In their January 2017 meeting in the White House, the British then-Prime Minister, Theresa May, spoke of how the White House and Number 10 were ‘united in our recognition of NATO as the bulwark of our collective defense’ and how they had ‘reaffirmed [their] unshakeable commitment to this alliance’ (White House 2017a). But May pointedly added the following: ‘Mr. President, I think you said — you confirmed that you’re 100 percent behind NATO’. In the context of much wider concerns about the US’s security guarantee to Europe, this was designed to reduce uncertainty by forcing Trump either to concede or deny the US commitment. Here, the problems associated with inconstancy came into play, with May seeking to have them openly signalled to all NATO members, an understated example of a European friend seeking an articulation of constancy, as a key aspect of the transatlantic relationship. A rather less subtle example came with Trump’s June 2020 announcement of his decision to withdraw US troops from Germany without prior consultation with the Germans, prompting the Secretary of Defense, Mark Esper, to visit Brussels to reassure the NATO Secretary General that future decisions would be the subject of discussion with NATO allies (Al Jazeera 2020).

It is acknowledged that in times of a changing or changed context we might expect to see a rupture in continuities. Nevertheless, it is not unreasonable to expect that as other things change around actors, especially in more unpredictable ways (Dombrowski and Reich 2017), they will seek to hold on to what has so far been a stable base of support – and therefore predictable. In Rumsfeldian terms, in the face of a multitude of unknowns, actors will want to hold on to the knowns – to the constants. Those constants come in the form of friends and allies who remain true to their friends and allies, such that they constitute continuity and predictability in respect of their interrelations. It is precisely this idea of what constitutes ‘reasonable’, however, that this study challenges - as well as the notion that Trump’s foreign policy might be accidentally versus deliberately unpredictable.

***Inconsistency***

A second aspect of unpredictability is inconsistency and, as with inconstancy, forms part of the unpacking of continuity. Unpredictability is concerned with a lack of consistency; and, inversely, predictability is concerned with a demonstration of consistency and the absence of change (the presence of continuities) across time. Inconsistency is not a necessary aspect of unpredictability as doctrine – although there is a valid point here that, if the actor in question is never inconsistent, then unpredictability is hard to maintain. If an actor does the same thing every time, they cannot easily claim to be irregular in their actions.

In investigating this further, inconsistency can be said to apply in a number of ways, as outlined, non-exhaustively, here. First, there is a temporal element in that, while the context in which actors make their foreign policy changes, there are continuities both at home and abroad. Northedge (1968: 10) refers to the aims of foreign policy as having ‘a certain perennial quality about them’, even while speaking of the existence of a paradox in that the implementation of these aims in the concrete circumstances of the times has to bow to ever-changing realities. When assessing inconsistency in light of this ‘perennial quality’ to foreign policy, the conceptualisation of unpredictability constructed here effectively asks whether the rhetoric or action under analysis is inconsistent with the rhetoric and action of previous White House administrations. Has Trump at least tried to *pursue* (as opposed to it being an accidental feature of) a foreign policy that is inconsistent with previous administrations, even where no seemingly good or obvious reason for doing so exists?

There is a second, policy, element to be considered too, where an unpredictability frame, here in relation to consistency, could be usefully employed to analyse the gap between rhetoric and action in precisely the same way as we look to resources as an explanatory variable to help us understand why the promises of the rhetoric were not matched in the implementation of that policy rhetoric or, indeed, were not ultimately achieved. It is worth emphasising, however, that this is not the argument that any inconsistency between rhetoric and action is *necessarily* an indicator of unpredictability; simply that it should be *considered* as an explanatory variable and the idea entertained that the rhetoric was constructed in order to mislead the target actor deliberately.

Thirdly, analysis can look for evidence of inconsistency across foreign policy rhetoric and actions in more cross-cutting ways, for example in respect of different but similar actors, such that the expectation might ‘reasonably’ be that Trump’s foreign policy towards Germany would be consistent with his foreign policy towards France given that both would ordinarily be considered to be close friends. To put it another way, it is clear that Trump’s inconsistency is not inherent within any one particular foreign policy statement or specific policy; these are typically extremely clear. Yet those can, and do, conflict with other statements and policy positions and it is the inconsistency over the mix that causes other actors to doubt their ability to predict and to prepare in light of those predictions. It is worth considering former National Security Advisor, John Bolton’s, comments on preparations made for the July 2018 summits in Europe: ‘Trump was not following any international grand strategy, or even a consistent trajectory. His thinking was like an archipelago of dots (like individual real estate deals), leaving the rest of us to discern – or create – policy’ (2020: 111). Assuming a starting position, therefore, of leaders having a consistent set of thinking in respect to another actor or longer-term situation may be problematic.

Inconsistency may additionally apply in respect of a single actor’s – in this case, Trump’s ­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­ – rhetoric and action. Thus, in the case of a changed context, for example in the case of a critical juncture where we can recognise and understand the reasons for a break with previous rhetoric and action, analysis can still expect there to be consistency in that individual’s leadership across the new situation, i.e. in the leader’s perceptions and responses, such that in a relatively short period of time, the likely course of action can be identified by those outside the decision-making process itself. Inconsistency would therefore look like a break in the logic of the range of responses, that perception of the logic being derived from prior responses. There is, however, perhaps one caveat. Trump (or any other such actor) may not view his actions as inconsistent, to the extent that he may not actually see the contradiction in his approach. To return to the open GOP letter (WOTR Staff 2016), this also said:

He [Trump] is fundamentally dishonest. Evidence of this includes his attempts to deny positions he has unquestionably taken in the past, including on the 2003 Iraq war and the 2011 Libyan conflict. We accept that views evolve over time, but this is simply misrepresentation.

Trump has repeatedly been accused of lying, or at least that he seems unconcerned with the truth (Drezner (2016) – what Lars Kristiansen and Bernd Kaussler (2018) call ‘the Bullshit Doctrine’. Unpredictability, however, still allows for inconsistency to be a feature of foreign policymaking.

Finally, to a large degree, consistency can be said to relate to the identity of an actor. In his articulation of what constitute the forces of continuity for any actor, Northedge (1968: 12) talks about the international system, geography and ‘p]erhaps too the *ethos* of a nation, the thoughts and feelings which come natural on the particular piece of earth which they inhabit’, going on to say that they ‘all dispose a state to take the same things for granted about foreign policy, to indulge the same prejudices, dream the same dreams’. Since these are ‘perennials’ (ibid: 10), we would expect to see consistency in how they are reflected in foreign policy and an *un*predictable foreign policy would not reflect them consistently across issues and interactions. This does illustrate, however, one of the reasons why unpredictability has hitherto not been the subject of conceptual grappling, i.e. that consistency is the outcome of a logical contemplation that is itself based on the relationship of the state in question to its own geography and people, as well as the international system. In other words, consistency is the outcome of rational thinking, not least about one’s own identity.

***Unconstrainedness***

A third aspect of unpredictability relates to constraint or, more accurately, perceptions of constraint. The notion of constraint is caught most sharply in the agency versus structure debate. For foreign policy analysts, the salient point is that any actor’s foreign policy cannot be understood as divorced from the international environment in which it operates ‘[t]he structure of international society, then, together with the alliance and commitment framework within which states operate, form significant elements of an international structure which constrains and shapes foreign policy processes’ (Fang 2008; see also Farrands 1989: 95).

The domestic environment acts as a further constraint (Putnam 1993), with predictability usually understood as being the outcome of state or organisational structures. In the foreign policy literature, in the western and especially US context, much work has focused on the role of bureaucracies, revealing the role bureaucracies play in ensuring continuity of institutional knowledge and behaviour. In the western context at least, leaders are deemed to be structurally constrained, including by past events and responses (Renshon and Renshon 2008). The capacity for change is therefore seen as limited and change at home regarded as predictable, signalled, ideally (and usually) as a part of a changing context, to which a new response is required (see, for instance, Meernik 2005 on the role of crisis). The accoutrements of bureaucracies are documentation, which mean that predictability often comes in the form of structuring doctrines: constitutions, foreign policy concepts, security strategies, military doctrines etc. Even in a political system such as that of the US where the president has a good deal of control over foreign policy, Congress, the judiciary, public opinion, the media (albeit the influence of the latter two is debated (see Clare 2007)) serve as potential brakes on any president’s foreign policy. That body of literature arguing that Trump’s foreign policy has ultimately been ‘ordinary’ (Herbert et al., 2019) or ‘standard’ (Abrams 2017) has based the argument on the capacity of those structures to constrain Trump. Any leader is seen as further constrained by the resources available to them, not least budgetary, as Trump found when it came to building the much trumpeted wall on the US’s borders with Mexico.

There is validity in these arguments, of course, except where they ignore two things. The first is the second environment of Putnam’s (the international) where perceptions matter (Herrmann 2001; Keller 2005; Garrison 2007; Potter 2007) and where other actors are building their own foreign policies and responses to others based on what they think they know, including that any actor, even the US president, cannot act in a wholly unconstrained manner. Trump’s foreign policy may look accidentally unpredictable because others are used to leaders showing, approximately speaking, a consistent regard for these constraints; they can account, as his detractors do, for the changes Trump is forced to make in his foreign policy to his starting ignorance of foreign policy, how it is formulated and enacted. Over time, however, external responses are recalibrated in line with perceptions that the lack of constraint is more permanent than temporary.

Separately, as well as sometimes relatedly, the second is the possibility that a leader refuses to be constrained. Arguments about Trump’s ignorance of process and procedures take us only so far. That a leader, unencumbered by prior political, let alone international political, experience, is elected is nothing new, bureaucracies should serve to fill in the gaps in such a leader’s education. It is not reasonable to assume no attempt was made to educate and, in so doing, to constrain Trump. Arguing that, even if only eventually, all leaders are and believe themselves to be constrained in their foreign policy does not help us understand a Trump who, unconstrainedly stands before the world’s media and says he believes the President of Russia rather than his own Director of National Intelligence (Criekemans 2018). Or one who breaks with diplomatic procedure to meet with another state’s foreign minister (Russia’s Lavrov) behind closed doors (DW 2019). Nor does it explain a Trump who undermines, on multiple occasions, the multilateralism that is one of the key underpinnings of the LWO that the US itself was so central to building in the aftermath of the Second World War: as evidenced by the withdrawal from the UN Human Rights Council (CUP 2018), the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF Treaty) (Bentley 2019), or the Paris Climate Accord (White House 2017).

***Unreliability***

Although the three aspects above are distinct and stand in their own right, they all lead to a fourth and final aspect of unpredictability which relates to questions of reliability, which itself often combines the previous three aspects in a way that makes it more than the sum of the three other parts.

If an actor behaves in a manner inconsistent with the longer-term projection of their identity; if they treat friends as foes and foes as friends; if they act in a manner inconsistent with their own structures, with those built at the constitutional level to constrain the most powerful of domestic actors – these all combine to make for an inherently unreliable actor and therefore an unpredictable one.

In their foreign policy relations, actors naturally seek to estimate the range of possible responses which another actor will consider when responding to a given foreign policy situation. In such circumstances, friends and allies would formulate their own foreign policy in a fashion that relies on a fellow actor to pursue a course of action consistent with what they know of that actor and the situation. The unpredictable actor precisely cannot be relied on in this fashion – they may do anything. Importantly, that ‘anything’ may be understood as an irrational response, in the sense that all options are open. But the inherent threat here is not specifically the (possible) irrationality of the potential response, but that the response can be in no way reliably predetermined – and, therefore, reliably strategically cautioned against.

Most critically, reliability must be understood in the context of reliability *to whom and based on what*. Foreign policy is targeted at the international arena, not the domestic one, such that foreign policy doctrines are intrinsically outward facing strategies. For external actors, it is not unreasonable to assume that actor A can be relied upon at least to act in a fashion consistent with their own national interests and in a fashion that is supported sufficiently at home. For those on the outside looking on, such consistency makes for reliable policy pronouncements and negotiations, including those relating to foreign policy. Further cause for reassurance about reliability comes, as already suggested above in relation to constraints, in the notion that even in a presidential system – and even when speaking of a particular president’s foreign policy doctrine – that foreign policy is seen as tied inherently to an administration that extends beyond the single person of the president. The sheer number of defence secretaries, secretaries of State, FBI directors, and even press secretaries in Trump’s presidency are obstacles to such reassurance, giving cause to wonder, for instance, whether a meeting with a particular Secretary of State can be relied upon. The highly personalised nature of Trump’s foreign policy, set within a structure where the presidency already has so much latitude when it comes to foreign policy, means that domestic actors have not been sufficiently brought into the logics of the doctrine, such that it is easily assessed as accidental and chaotic versus deliberate and any chaos designed. Arguments can be made, of course, about the wisdom of a strategy designed to ensure even close friends cannot reliably determine the likely course of action, but neither argument is one that invalidates the notion of a doctrine of unpredictability. Unreliability differs from inconstancy, it should be said, in that it applies equally to friend and foe, but also because it extends to a specific foreign policy situation where even those designated *at that point* as friend are not privy to the particularities of the foreign policy action, as was the case with the US withdrawal from the INF Treaty, for example, or the 2020 decision to withdraw troops from Germany.

In effect, predictability then means the ability to forecast the actor’s actions in a reliable fashion – which Trump is specifically trying to ensure cannot happen. As Colin Dueck (2018) says: ‘Donald Trump throws fastballs at allies and adversaries alike.’ This, however, constitutes a both a useful and reductionist account of what it means to be reliable in relation to foreign policy. It has utility in that, in forecasting, states usually look to the past behaviour of an actor to help understand the past range of behaviour, and therefore to understand the relative likelihood of that actor pursuing one course of action over another. It is reductionist, however, in that it accounts only for the actor under analysis. Foreign policy is, of course, about interaction and exchange. It follows, therefore, that the relationship(s) matters. Thus, it is argued that predictability has to take into account the expectations of others, which is that reliable partners be just that – reliable; the inverse of this being that unpredictability does not.

Notably, understanding unreliability as a crucial element in unpredictability also entails identifying what unpredictability is not in relation to other theorising. To expand then on the earlier discussion about what unpredictability is not: it is distinct, for instance, from Madman Theory – although it could perhaps be viewed as a distant cousin. Keren Yahri-Milo (2018: 73) – in speaking of Trump’s ‘rational irrationality’ – says that unpredictability might (erroneously) be viewed as ‘part of a calculated strategy to make adversaries think that he is crazy’. In essence, this would be a classic case of the Nixon approach, in which he attempted to portray himself as the ‘crazy guy’ who would do anything (Natfali 2017). And indeed, aspects of this approach could potentially be identified within Trump’s foreign policy, not least his engagement with North Korea in relation to nuclear weapons. Yet to equate this ‘craziness’ with the totality of unpredictability ignores the fundamental intention of such a doctrine. As Roseanne McManus (2019: 977) says, Madman Theory is insanity and ‘mental instability’ at that – or at least giving the perception of such. Reliability is about knowing what a given actor will or is most likely to do. Achieving the reverse does not necessitate that the actor in question will adopt any seemingly ‘crazy’ option. It is simply the case that the option taken is not one of the reliable options, that does not make of it a deliberate expression of ‘insanity’ – even where the unreliable may also be crazy, or at least perceived to be.

Similarly, unpredictability (as unreliability) is also not strategic ambiguity. John Haines (2017: 135) draws a distinction between unpredictability and strategic ambiguity, because ‘you want the other side to know clearly what you are capable of doing and willing to do. Mere vagueness is not strategic ambiguity’. Haines makes this argument as a criticism, in the sense that unpredictability does not meet the expectations of credible threat. Simply put, if you do not clearly communicate that you can defeat an enemy – in the sense that you have not reliably outlined what you are capable of (where unpredictability puts all, and also no, cards on the table) – then that enemy will not be able to make a deterrence calculation that they should not challenge. Saying that you can do anything may sound as though you can take all options, but it also requires that you do not make a distinct and reasonable threat that your enemy can respond to. Again, however, equating unpredictability with the expectations of strategic ambiguity misinterprets the nature of the former doctrine.

**A Doctrine of Unpredictability: Oxymoronic?**

The obvious criticism of this approach is that unpredictability constitutes the antithesis of doctrine. If doctrine is understood to be a consistent and clear worldview (for the purposes of conducting foreign policy), unpredictability appears actively to reject such a concept; indeed, it conflicts with everything that a doctrine is supposed to achieve and express. Hence, it is unsurprising that analysts would consider Trump’s foreign policy and not be able to identify a doctrine. Critically, this is not simply the idea that unpredictability is not a doctrine, but that this approach is negated as such in that it cannot be actively theorised and conceptualised in terms of doctrine.

This rejection of unpredictability as a doctrine, however, raises a question as to why not? Instead of asking whether Trump has a doctrine or not, why is the question not: why is the current debate incapable of conceptualising unpredictability as a doctrine? To the extent that unpredictability defies the concept of doctrine, how far is this a sign that it is not doctrine as opposed to exposing a problem with our conceptualisation of ‘doctrine’ and how that concept is operationalised within current foreign policy analysis? The notion of doctrine as a ‘worldview’ is not value free. Even amongst the contestation that defines the current debate on doctrine, disciplinary perception tends to favour issues such as consistency, reliability, and rationality in foreign policy. Critically, these are all very clearly labels that do not apply to the unpredictable Trump and the policy of foreign affairs that he has pursued. Even more significantly, these are labels that Trump actively opposes as part of that strategy of unpredictability. Trump’s actions do not reflect the types of decision-making that are typically associated with doctrine; indeed, that is the entire point.

For example, Trump has actively rejected the notion of foreign policy as a chess game – where this analogy is frequently used to characterise foreign policy decision-making (e.g. Arquilla 2013). (Perhaps unsurprisingly, given that many people would imagine that Trump would be terrible at chess.) Trump himself has said (admittedly in a ghost-written book): ‘You can’t be imaginative or entrepreneurial if you’ve got too much structure. I prefer to come to work each day and just see what develops’ (Trump 1989: 1). Consequently, Trump rejects the very nature of a chess strategy, where this demands a rigid ideological structure, as typically associated with doctrine. Instead, Trump advocates an approach based on business/commercial experience. In a further book, *The America We Deserve*, Trump (2000) proposes the model of the ‘dealmaker’:

The true dealmaker knows when to be tough and when to back off. He knows when to bluff and he knows when to threaten, understanding that you threaten only when prepared to carry out the threat. The dealmaker is cunning, secretive, focused, and never settles for less than he wants.

As per his rhetoric from the 2016 election campaign, Trump self-styles foreign policy leadership as based on business skill. On being asked whether he would use nuclear weapons, Trump (in CBS 2016) replied:

Well, it is an absolute last stance. And, you know, I use the word unpredictable. You want to be unpredictable. And somebody recently said -- I made a great business deal. And the person on the other side was interviewed by a newspaper. And how did Trump do this? And they said, he's so unpredictable. And I didn't know if he meant it positively or negative [sic]. It turned out he meant it positively.

As well as reiterating Trump’s active and consistent expression to unpredictability as a form of doctrine, this quote demonstrates the way in which that expression is deeply underpinned by beliefs the President has about his own values and leadership style.

Consequently, Trump’s foreign policy approach has been described as transactional, whereby he considers each foreign policy case – or, indeed, ‘deal’ – on an individual basis as he would a business negotiation. More specifically, Rebecca Friedman Lissner and Micah Zenko (2017) put forward the concept of ‘tactical transactionalism’, where they argue that Trump’s approach focuses on short term wins over long-term insight and ideological development (evident in Trump’s decision to carry out airstrikes in Syria as a response to chemical weapons use) and prioritises the win over everything else (on this last point, see also Wolf 2017: 99-100). This, incidentally, is not the ‘win’ of achieving defined objectives, but simply winning; indeed, that having clearly defined objectives beyond the contextualised situation of an individual transaction goes against the very idea of unpredictability. At the same time, the toll for allies particularly is a heavy one for such transactionalism, by its very nature, can entail the four aspects we have identified as constituting unpredictability

It is all the more surprising, therefore, that transaction has not yet been directly associated with unpredictability as doctrine. Conversely, the transactional approach has often been set apart as a somewhat separate aspect of Trump’s foreign policy (Steff and Widwell 2020: 3) or a case where transactionalism is understood to make doctrine impossible (Lissner and Zenko 2017). Yet unpredictability can be viewed as an expression of Trump’s perceived business acumen as transactionalism, where this provides a more deliberate model of doctrine through which to view unpredictability as a form of policy. The crossover between transaction and unpredictability lies in making sure your opponent does not know what you are going to do. As Michelle Bentley, Clara Eroukhmanoff and Ursula Hackett (2017: 166) say: ‘Perhaps the origins of Trump’s unpredictable decisions can be traced to Trump’s own business playbook: hide your game and do not let your adversary know your cards’. As Trump (2000) says of this: ‘High ideals and grand plans will get you only so far’. It is worth saying that this approach is not incompatible with realist expectations of foreign policy and even – at a conceptual level – the self-interest associated with ‘America First’. The key thing is, however, that – at least in his mind – Trump is not playing chess. Trump views the world and the foreign policy that governs it as a very different type of game. To judge his foreign policy by the standards of chess, therefore, is an inaccurate mode of analysis. Leaving aside the rights and wrongs of Peter Dombrowski and Simon Reich’s (2017) argument that doctrine or grand strategy is just not possible in the twenty-first century argument, some consideration of the implications of such an argument are worthwhile – does Trump’s transactionalist approach to foreign policy have some merit given the very changed international context in which all states are functioning?

In particular, the idea of the chess game connects to analysts’ preoccupations with the rational actor model. Regardless of whether or not analysts adopt a realist model of ideological thinking, there still exists a generalised tendency to look for a rational explanation for doctrine and to assume that the actor is attempting to pursue a rational act. This search for rationality can be seen, for example, in relation to Madman Theory and Nixon’s attempts to portray his foreign policy as ‘crazy’ in a bid to coerce Communist states. Within this context, Nixon’s ‘craziness’ is understood as the action of a rational actor motivated by rational aims. This same rationality has not been associated with Trump. Indeed, discussions of his foreign policy are frequently framed explicitly in comparison to the rational actor. For example, as Mark Beeson (2016) says: ‘The reality is though, that nothing can actually be ruled out from a man who is entirely unpredictable, and a long way from the sort of “rational actor” we like to think make the decisions that shape international politics’. This type of comparison is not necessarily problematic – but it becomes so when that approach in effect ignores the type of decision-making that characterises Trump’s foreign policy, as argued above. In analytical terms, understanding needs to detach from a perception of the rational actor model in order to comprehend this situation – or at least, to be able to comprehend Trump’s actions as a type of doctrine. Ultimately, this is the claim that Trump is not considered to have a doctrine because his approach does not fit in with pre-existing ideas about how doctrine is structured and what this should look like, i.e. the rational actor model. The current debate rests on certain expectations about what doctrine is, to the extent that this precludes the ability to be able to see Trump’s unpredictability as doctrine.

Importantly, this issue plays back into the idea of erraticism. To draw a line between unpredictability as doctrine and unpredictability as chaos misunderstands the nature of the former. When analysing Trump, this is not a case of choosing whether the president was ‘erratic’ or ‘deliberately erratic.’ Setting the debate up in such binary terms based on rationality ignores the sentiment of Trump’s unpredictability – which is one of fluidity and transactionalism. In other words, it is to ignore the internal rationality of Trump himself, seen from where he stands, there is a logic at work, a subjective rationality, one might say.

This situation is also one of expression. The vocabulary that is employed to construct our current understanding of doctrine is insufficient to understand unpredictability on those terms. The vocabulary cannot express what analysts are seeing and, as such, unpredictability can (erroneously) be understood as something other than doctrine – or, at least, it is mislabelled. Disciplinary vocabulary is rooted in a certain culture and understanding borne of the inter-subjective community formed by politicians domestically and internationally, and founded too within certain expectations about the actual political relationships that foreign policy should foster. Indeed, analyses of Trump’s foreign policy can be viewed as trying to grapple with the limitations of the language employed, where this has been expressed in trying to find new ways of conceptualising the focus of US foreign policy under a Trump administration. This trend is evidenced in the commentary of Tim Kaine (2017: 42) – Hillary Clinton’s 2016 presidential running mate. In discussing Trump’s foreign policy, Kaine draws a distinction between what he calls ‘OPLANS’ (operational plans) and strategy – a vocabulary that Kaine draws explicitly from the military. Kaine is arguing that the Trump administration bases foreign policy on tactics – individual actions – as opposed to strategy, where this seeks to conceptualise Trump’s approach as something other than doctrine. Kaine’s discussion can be viewed as an attempt to conceptualise something that the vocabulary he has access to cannot actually express. Within this context then, the question is not whether Trump has a doctrine, but the extent to which we cannot answer that question if we restrict ourselves to *existing* notions and expectations of doctrine as an analytic concept and measure.

In making such an assertion, this argument does have to address a potential counterclaim as to whether it is valuable to amend, effectively, our conception of doctrine in order to classify Trump’s foreign policy in such terms. Why is it not the case that Trump’s approach does not fit an existing expectation of doctrine and that this – indeed, specifically because of this – is sufficient and appropriate to exclude unpredictability as a form of doctrine? If unpredictability does not fit our conception of doctrine, surely this is simply a sign that it is not doctrine? Yet treating Trump’s approach as an outlier ignores the wider understanding of doctrine as a worldview that drives foreign policy decision-making. This approach would also create comparative issues that would preclude an evaluative contrast of Trump to the foreign policies of his presidential predecessors. Exceptionalism, we would argue, is to be avoided wherever and whenever possible. To bolster further this perspective, the slightly ironic aspect of this situation is that it is not entirely new: President Barack Obama was also criticised for failing to have a doctrine (Diehl 2010; Ferguson 2011; for a wider analysis see Drezner 2011), where those criticisms can be founded in an idea that Obama’s foreign policy did not live up to classic expectations as to what doctrine entails (Lizza 2011). Indeed, Obama (in J. Goldberg 2016) himself noted that his approach differentiated from the ‘Washington Playbook’ that had previously characterised doctrine construction in the past. Admittedly, many of those who claimed that Obama did not possess a doctrine were his critics and, therefore, there was a clear incentive to deny that Obama had established a grand strategy as a means of disparaging him. Yet the inconsistency between ideas such as pragmatism and the definitive hardline military policies that previously governed doctrinal thinking can – should, even – also be viewed as a reason for the idea that Obama lacked doctrine. In the same vein, so Trump’s deviation from accepted thinking can be viewed as a reason why he too has often been denied the label of doctrine and that – even where this has been granted – there has been misunderstanding as to the detail of that doctrine. Admittedly, the situation vis-à-vis Trump may be more complex in that Trump says he intends to avoid signalling his intentions, to the extent – as touched upon above – that any analysis could expect to see fewer indicators of what his doctrine is i.e. in the form of conceptual and doctrinal documents.

Critically, there are a number of caveats that should be emphasised at this point: four in total. First, this argument is not to claim that unpredictability as a doctrine cannot have negative consequences of the type associated with purely haphazard behaviour. Second, it is also not to claim that Trump constitutes some type of ‘evil genius,’ to the extent that his erratic nature is overlooked – or, indeed, excused. The logical conclusion of upholding unpredictability is the claim that everything Trump says is calculated to destabilise, but where there is a rational person beneath this who is deliberately manipulating their language. This claim, however, would be an exaggeration given what else is known about Trump’s personality and demeanour. As Zeke Miller (2017) – while acknowledging the value that Trump ascribes to unpredictability – comments:

But to apply a strategic lens to all of his comments would be far too generous, as the individual pronouncements are often driven by ego, slight, or frustration. Determining where Trump falls on the strategic-bombastic scale is a constant challenge not just for journalists, but also for the American public and the rest of the world.

Third, the argument made here is not to claim that Trump is entirely anomalous. If he were, then perhaps this would not be doctrine? Analysts, however, must be careful not to see difference where this is not necessarily the case. As well as not misunderstanding Trump because of the vocabulary employed, foreign policy analysts should also not allow that same vocabulary to underpin an assumption that all those presidents who have gone before have had an ideal doctrine that was perfectly adhered to.

Furthermore, this is also not to make a fourth claim: that Trump expresses and realises the doctrine of unpredictability *well*. Indeed, as an erratic figure, the case can be made that he is erratically unpredictable – whereby this is the claim that he has handled unpredictability poorly. For example – as already alluded to above – behaviours such as communicating foreign policy through Twitter are not ideal (Mahmood and Cheema 2018: 1; Bond 2019: 5), especially where unpredictability is an inherently precarious and potentially controversial strategy, having the capacity both to breed and exacerbate division. The way in which unpredictable rhetoric as expressed through Twitter can exacerbate existing division, in this instance in US-Russia relations, can be seen in a White House tweet of May 8 2020, which spoke of how: ‘On May 8, 1945, America and Great Britain had victory over the Nazis!’ In turn, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation tweeted a link to the official spokesperson’s (Maria Zakharova’s) response, which spoke of how this was a contradiction of the Russian-US statement, also produced for the same commemoration, in which the *multiple* actors who contributed to the defeat of Nazi Germany were recognised. This also offered Zakharova the opportunity to point out that ‘it is unacceptable that such a statement can be made by official authorities of a nation that calls itself ‘leader of the free world, [sic] ‘defender of democracy’ and an uncompromising crusader against fake news’ (Russian Foreign Ministry 2020). Consequently, while this article asserts the presence of a doctrine of unpredictability, it does not intend to suggest that Trump or his administration has been successful in its realisation.

In a continuation of this last point, the argument as to whether or not a given foreign policy approach fits in with pre-existing ideas of what doctrine is plays into a wider question of whether or not unpredictability as a doctrine is thought to be ‘good’. Where unpredictability has been so heavily, if erroneously, associated with haphazard chaos it is unsurprising that Trump’s approach has been considered in negative terms – and indeed, it can be argued that there are numerous negative consequences to the way in which Trump specifically has carried out his doctrine (in the sense that this has been done so badly). Not least to the extent that Trump is connected to a challenge to the LWO, it is frequently difficult to see his approach to foreign policy in positive terms. To the extent that Trump appears to reflect the basis of the liberal international system, this perpetuates the notion that unpredictability is ‘bad’ regardless of the consequences. This trend is also repeated in his rejection of foreign policy actions that are seen as inherently valuable, such as the Iran nuclear weapons deal. Beyond the consequences, however, it is worth asking why we are uncomfortable with recognising unpredictability as a form of doctrine. Is this purely because this is not considered the typical way of doing things?

In expanding this observation – and to finish this article on a suggestion for future research – is unpredictability rejected because it is not consider the typical Western way of doing things? Unpredictability is treated as a new ferocious development; yet it is perhaps nothing new when compared to the assessments of foreign policies of other countries outside the West. Again, this is not to say we need to approve of the consequences; it may still be that such administrations produce foreign policy outcomes that are considered ‘not cricket’. What the findings of this article suggest is further evidence that the decentring in work on international politics we have seen elsewhere might usefully be considered and applied to analysis of foreign policy doctrines and to some of the foundational assumptions in the analysis of Western foreign policies, specifically rationality and predictability. For, is it the case, perhaps, that unpredictability is not considered doctrine in the sense that it is an anathema, but only in the Western experience? Within this context, do we think only in the sense of the rational *Western* actor, to the extent that certain types of action are not recognised as doctrine by virtue of their relevance outside the Western experience? If so, this article constitutes an important beginning on the road to finding an antidote to such exceptionalist thinking, grounded as it is in a notion of Western superiority.

**Conclusion**

The article began by asking whether Trump had a foreign policy doctrine and, if so, whether that doctrine was one of unpredictability. In respect of empirical analyses of Trump’s foreign policy, much has been made of his (even if not phrased in precisely these terms) unpredictable nature. Few analysts, however, have seriously engaged with the idea that unpredictability can be considered a deliberate strategy, such that it should be treated as doctrine. This absence can be attributed to a failure within the foreign policy analysis debate to recognise and assess forms of doctrine that fall outside established conventions of thinking as to what doctrine should comprise – not least where this is frequently equated with the rational actor model. The current debate – in effect – does not have the conceptual tools or vocabulary to analyse fully a doctrinal approach that exists ‘outside’ that conceptual knowledge. Within that context, the detail of Trump’s strategy has been overlooked and/or misunderstood – or simply reduced unpredictability to an erroneous measure of unintentional chaos and erraticism, where this considers unpredictability as a characteristic of some foreign policies, and usually a negative one, versus a strategy. This article has redressed this gap by not only arguing for a Trumpian doctrine of unpredictability, but also conceptualising unpredictability (as doctrine) itself – specifically by proposing a four-pronged model of unpredictability, based on: inconstancy, inconsistency, unconstrainedness and unreliability.

In this exercise, good grounds were identified for why a doctrine of unpredictability has confounded analysis. Specifically, it is the case that the very nature of unpredictability defies doctrine precisely because it defies prediction. At the same time, this is revealing of a tendency, still, to rely on the idea that foreign policy is the outcome of a rational decision-making process that takes into account the full range of interests of the state in question and that reflects the intention of the leader to be transparent and clear in his or her signalling in order to ensure the smooth conduct of negotiations, as well as reliance on the idea that a universally shared – an objective – view of rationality exists. Equally, distinctions are often made between friends and foes with foreign policy friendships and alliances particularly being reliant on constancy, consistency and reliability. In all cases, ‘good’ foreign policy is seen as being dependent on some capacity to predict the actions of others and a sense of being mutually and similarly constrained. Analysts therefore treat foreign policy as being as much, if not more, about continuity than change. Little room is left in that kind of thinking for the idea that a leader might seek to wrongfoot foes - let alone friends.

In competition with that view, this article has argued that Trump is, in fact, predictably unpredictable, to the extent that this can be established as a doctrinal approach. This may not comprise doctrine in the classic sense but, the contention here is that the ‘classic’ ways of seeing and analysing may no longer be appropriate to the time we are in. Indeed, they arguably never have been. Trump’s foreign policy may have the entirely unlooked for benefit of demonstrating, in the starkest terms, our tendency to dismiss unpredictability as the terrain of those ‘less developed’ than us, speaking of anomalies where Western leaders are concerned, rather than recognising such anomalies as unpredictability, whether designed or not.

**References**

Abrams, Elliot (2017) ‘Trump the Traditionalist: A Surprisingly Standard Foreign Policy’, *Foreign Affairs* 96(4): 10-16.

Addicott, Jeffrey F. (2018) ‘Prosecuting the War on Terror in the Trump Administration: The Trump Doctrine – Is there Really a New Sheriff in Town?’, *Albany Government Law Review* 11(2): 209-49.

AlJazeera (2020) ‘Pentagon chief visits Brussels to reassure NATO over US plans’. *AlJazeera*: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/06/26/pentagon-chief-visits-brussels-to-reassure-nato-over-us-plans/>

Anton, Michael (2019) ‘The Trump Doctrine’, *Foreign Policy,* April 20: https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/04/20/the-trump-doctrine-big-think-america-first-nationalism/

Arquilla, John (2013) ‘Rational Security: How Chess Explains the World’, *Foreign Policy*, July 8: https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/07/08/how-chess-explains-the-world/

Beauchamp, Zack (2017) ‘What Syria Taught Us about Donald Trump’, *Vox*, April 13: https://www.vox.com/world/2017/4/13/15229246/syria-strike-trump-doctrine

Beeson, Mark (2016) ‘Trump the demagogue looks set to rule’, *The Conversation*, November 9: https://theconversation.com/trump-the-demagogue-looks-set-to-rule-68502

Bentley, Michelle (2019) ‘Here’s why Trump has made the bizarre decision to suspend a Russia nuclear treaty – and it's exactly what you would think’, *The Independent*, February 1: https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/trump-nuclear-arms-treaty-russia-links-election-puting-mueller-a8759006.html

Bentley, Michelle, Eroukhmanoff, Clara, and Hackett, Ursula (2017) ‘Trump’s 100 days: foreign policy and security implications – introduction’, *Critical Studies on Security* 5(2): 166-67.

Bertrand, Natasha (2017) ‘“A Freewheeling Operation”: Trump’s “Muddled” Syria Policy Could Do More Harm than Good”, *Business Insider UK*, April 12: <https://www.businessinsider.nl/trump-syria-policy-plan-rex-tillerson-haley-mcmaster-2017-4/>

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

Bond, Ian (2019) ‘Trump’s foreign policy: Two years of living dangerously’, *CER Bulletin* 124: 4-5.

CBS (2016) ‘Face the Nation Transcripts January 3, 2016’, *CBS News*: https://www.cbsnews.com/news/face-the-nation-transcripts-january-3-2016-trump-morell-donilon/

CUP (2018) ‘United States Withdraws from the UN Human Rights Council, Shortly After Receiving Criticism About Its Border Policy’, *American Journal of International Law* 112(4): 745-751.

Cha, Taesuh (2016) ‘The Return of Jacksonianism: the International Implications of the Trump Phenomenon’, *The Washington Quarterly* 39(4): 83-97.

Clare, Joe (2007) ‘Domestic Audiences and Strategic Interests’, *The Journal of Politics* 69(3): 732-45.

Clarke, Michael and Ricketts, Anthony (2017) ‘Understanding the Return of the Jacksonian Tradition’, *Orbis* 61(1): 13-26.

Criekemans, David (2018) ‘Will the Transatlantic Relationship Survive Trump Diplomacy?’. *Clingendael Institute,* 13 August: <https://spectator.clingendael.org/en/publication/will-transatlantic-relationship-survive-trump-diplomacy>

Daghrir, Wassim (2020) ‘Trump’s Foreign Policy Doctrine of Uncertainty’, *E-IR*, June 29: https://www.e-ir.info/2020/06/29/trumps-foreign-policy-doctrine-of-uncertainty/

Diehl, Jackson (2010) ‘Obama’s foreign policy needs an update’, *Washington Post*, November 22: https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/11/21/AR2010112102263.html

Dombrowksi, Peter and Reich, Simon (2018) ‘Beyond the Tweets: President Trump’s Continuity in Military Operations’, *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 12(2): 56-81.

Dombrowksi, Peter and Reich, Simon (2017) ‘Does Donald Trump have a grand strategy?’, *International Affairs,* 93(5): 1013-1037.

Dreazen, Yochi (2017) ‘Trump aide admits there actually isn’t a “Trump doctrine”’, *Vox*, April 10: https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2017/4/10/15243810/trump-syria-strike-chemical-weapon-foreign-policy-politico

Drezner, Daniel W. (2011) ‘Does Obama Have a Grand Strategy? Why We Need Doctrines in Uncertain Times’, *Foreign Affairs* 90(4): 57-68.

Drezner, Daniel W. (2016) ‘Trump likes to be “unpredictable”. That won’t work so well in diplomacy’, *Washington Post*, November 23: https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2016/11/23/trump-likes-to-be-unpredictable-that-wont-work-in-diplomacy/

Dueck, Colin (2018) ‘Trump’s Strategic Unpredictability, Its Pros and Its Cons’, *National Review*, December 28: https://www.nationalreview.com/2018/12/trump-foreign-policy-strategic-unpredictability-adversaries-allies/

Dumbrell, J. (2002) ‘Was There a Clinton Doctrine? President Clinton’s Foreign Policy Reconsidered’, *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 13(2): 43-56.

DW (2019) ‘Donald Trump meets Russia’s top diplomat at White House’. DW, 10 December 2019: <https://www.dw.com/en/donald-trump-meets-russias-top-diplomat-at-white-house/a-51615702>

Edsall, Thomas B. (2016) ‘Donald Trump, the Winning Wild Card’, *The New York Times*, March 8: https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/09/opinion/campaign-stops/donald-trump-the-winning-wild-card.html

Fang, Songying (2008) ‘The Informational Role of International Institutions and Domestic Politics’, *American Journal of Political Science* 52(2): 304-21.

Farrands, Christopher (1989) 'The Context of Foreign Policy Systems: Environment and Structure.' In *Understanding Foreign Policy. The Foreign Policy Systems Approach*, edited by Michael Clarke and Brian White, 84-108. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.

Friedman Lissner, Rebecca and Rapp-Hooper, Mira (2018) ‘The Day after Trump: American Strategy for a New International Order’, *The Washington Quarterly* 41(1): 7-25.

Friedman Lissner, Rebecca and Zenko, Micah (2017) ‘There is no Trump doctrine, and there will never be one’, *Business Insider*, July 23: https://www.businessinsider.com/there-is-no-trump-doctrine-and-there-will-never-be-one-2017-7?r=US&IR=T

Fuchs, Michael H (2017) ‘Donald Trump’s doctrine of unpredictability has the world on edge’, *The Guardian*, February 13: https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/feb/13/donald-trumps-doctrine-unpredictability-world-edge

Ferguson, Niall (2011) ‘Obama’s Egypt and Foreign-Policy Failures’, *Newsweek*, February 13: https://www.newsweek.com/obamas-egypt-and-foreign-policy-failures-68731

Garrison, Jean (2007) ‘Constructing the “National Interest” in U.S.-China Policy Making: How Foreign Policy Decision Groups Define and Signal Policy Choices’, *Foreign Policy Analysis* 3: 105-26.

Glaser, John, Preble, Christopher A., and Thrall, Trevor (2019) ‘Towards a More Prudent American Grand Strategy’, *Survival* 61(5): 25-42.

Goldberg, Jeffrey (2016) ‘The Obama Doctrine’, *The Atlantic*, April: https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/

Goldberg, Jeffrey (2018) ‘A Senior White House Official Defines the Trump Doctrine: “We’re America, Bitch”’, *The Atlantic*, June 11: https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/06/a-senior-white-house-official-defines-the-trump-doctrine-were-america-bitch/562511/

Goldberg, Nicholas (2020) ‘Trump has come up with the worst campaign slogan ever’, *Los Angeles Times*, May 14: <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2020-05-14/trump-transition-to-greatness-worst-slogan>

govinfo (2018) ‘The President’s News Conference With President Kersti Kaljulaid of Estonia, President Raimonds Vejonis of Latvia, and President Dalia Grybuaskaite of Lithuania’, *Compilation of Presidential Documents*, April 3, Office of the Federal Register, National Archives and Records Administration: https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/DCPD-201800212/html/DCPD-201800212.htm

Haines, John R. (2017) ‘Divining a “Trump Doctrine”’, *Orbis* 61(1): 125-36.

Herbert, Jon, McCrisken, Trevor, Wroe, Andrew (2019) *The Ordinary Presidency of Donald J. Trump,* Palgrave Macmillan.

Hermann, Charles F. (1995) 'Epilogue: Reflections on Foreign Policy Theory Building.' In *Foreign Policy Analysis. Continuity and Change in Its Second Generation*, edited by Laura Neack, Laura, Jeanne A.K. Hey, Patrick J. Haney, Patrick, 243-57. New Jersey: Prentice Hall.

Herrmann, Richard (2001) ‘The Power of Perceptions in Foreign-Policy Decision Making: Do Views of the Soviet Union Determine the Policy Choices of American Leaders?’, *American Journal of Political Science* 30(4): 841-75.

Hewitt, Hugh (2015) ‘Donald Trump In The Day He Took The Pledge’, September 3: https://www.hughhewitt.com/donald-trump-on-the-day-he-took-the-pledge/

Ikenberry, G.J. (2005) ‘Power and liberal order: America’s postwar world order in transition’, *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 5(2): 133-52.

Kaine, Tim (2017) ‘A New Truman Doctrine: Grand Strategy in a Hyperconnected World’, *Foreign Affairs* 94(4): 36-63.

Keller, Jonathan W. (2005) ‘Constraint Respecters, Constraint Challengers, and Crisis Decision Making in Democracies: A Case Study Analysis of Kennedy versus Reagan’, *Political Psychology* 26(6): 835-67.

Kristiansen, Lars J. and Kaussler, Bernd (2018) ‘The Bullshit Doctrine: Fabrications, Lies, and Nonsense in the Age of Trump’, *Informal Logic* 38(1): 13-52.

Lizza, Ryan (2011) ‘The Consequentialist’, *The New Yorker*, April 25: https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/05/02/the-consequentialist

Lynch, Colum (2017) ‘Nikki Haley and Trump’s Doctrine of Diplomatic Chaos’, *Foreign Affairs*, June 28: https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/06/28/nikki-haley-and-trumps-doctrine-of-diplomatic-chaos/

Mahmood, Nazish and Cheema, Pervaiz Iqbal (2018) ‘Trump and the US Foreign Policy Crisis’, *Strategic Studies* 38(4): 1-18.

McManus, Roseanne W. (2019) ‘Revisiting the Madman Theory: Evaluating the Impact of Different Forms of Perceived Madness in Coercive Bargaining’, *Security Studies* 28(5): 976-1009.

Meernik, James (2005) ‘Foreign Policy Orientation, Strategic Interaction, and the Initiation of International Crises’, *Foreign Policy Analysis* 2: 165-79.

Miller, Zeke J. (2017) ‘Why Trump Values Being Unpredictable’, *Time*, October 6: https://time.com/4972396/why-president-trump-values-being-unpredictable/

Natfali, Tim (2017) ‘The Problem With Trump’s Madman Theory’, *The Atlantic*, October 4: <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/10/madman-theory-trump-north-korea/542055/>

NATO (2019) ‘NATO: Ready for the Future. Adapting the Alliance (2018-2019)’. <https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2019_11/20191129_191129-adaptation_2018_2019_en.pdf>

Northedge, F.S. (1968) 'The Nature of Foreign Policy.' In *The Foreign Policies of the Powers*, edited F.S. Northedge, 9-39. London: Faber and Faber.

Post Opinions Staff (2016) ‘A transcript of Donald Trump’s meeting with The Washington Post editorial board’, *The Washington Post*, March 21: https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-partisan/wp/2016/03/21/a-transcript-of-donald-trumps-meeting-with-the-washington-post-editorial-board/

Potter, Philip B.K. (2007) ‘Does Experience Matter?: American Presidential Experience, Age, and International Conflict’, J*ournal of Conflict Resolution,* 51(3): 351-78.

Putnam, Robert D. (1988) ‘Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two-Level Games’, *International Organization* 42: 427-69.

Putnam, Robert D. (1993) ‘Two-Level Games: the Impact of Domestic Politics on Transatlantic Bargaining.’ In *America and Europe in an Era of Change*, edited by Helga Haftendorn and Christian Tuschhoff, 69-83. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Renshon, Jonathan and Renshon, Stanley A. (2008) ‘The Theory and Practice of Foreign Policy Decision-Making’, *Political Psychology* 29(4): 509-36.

Russian Foreign Ministry (2020)‘ #Opinion by Maria #Zakharova’.Facebook, 10 May 2020: <https://www.facebook.com/MIDRussia/photos/a.265191980246917/2451989308233829/>. Accessed 11 May 2020.

Sa, Harry (2016) ‘The Trump Doctrine Thurs Far: Neither Rhyme Nor Reason’, *RSIS Commentary* 1: 1-3.

Schweller, Randall (2018) ‘Three Cheers for Trump’s Foreign Policy’, *Foreign Affairs,* September/October: https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2018-08-14/three-cheers-trumps-foreign-policy

Sjostedt, Roxanna (2007) ‘The Discursive Origins of a Doctrine: Norms, Identity, and Securitization under Harry S. Truman and George W. Bush’, *Foreign Policy Analysis* 3(3): 233-54.

Steff, Reuben and Widwell, Alan (2020) ‘Understanding and evaluating Trump’s foreign policy: a three frame analysis’, *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Firstview: 1-26.

Times Editorial Board, The (2017) ‘Our Dishonest President’, *Los Angeles Times*, April 2: https://www.latimes.com/projects/la-ed-our-dishonest-president/

Trump, Donald (1989) *The Art of the Deal*. London Arrow Books.

Trump, Donald (2000) *The America We Deserve*. Los Angeles: Renaissance Books.

Trump, Donald (2016) ‘Transcript: Donald Trump’s Foreign Policy Speech’, *The New York Times*, April 27: https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/28/us/politics/transcript-trump-foreign-policy.html

Wainer, David and Wadhams, Nick (2020) ‘U.S. Killing of Soleimani Leaves Trump “Totally Unpredictable”’, *Bloomberg*, January 4: https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-01-04/u-s-killing-of-soleimani-leaves-trump-totally-unpredictable

White House (2017a) ‘President Trump and Prime Minister May’s Opening Remarks’, January 27: https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/president-trump-prime-minister-mays-opening-remarks/

White House (2017b) ‘Statement by President Trump on the Paris Climate Accord’, June 1: https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-president-trump-paris-climate-accord/

White House, The (@whitehouse). ‘On May 8, 1945, America and Great Britain had victory over the Nazis! “America’s spirit will always win. In the end, that’s what happens.”’, 9:33PM, May 8 2020. Tweet: <https://twitter.com/WhiteHouse/status/1258842411524132865?s=20>

Wolf, Reinhard (2017) ‘Donald Trump’s Status-Driven Foreign Policy’, *Survival* 59(5): 99-116.

WOTR Staff (2016) ‘Open Letter on Donald Trump from GOP National Security Leaders’, *War on the Rocks*, March 2: https://warontherocks.com/2016/03/open-letter-on-donald-trump-from-gop-national-security-leaders/

Wright, Thomas (2019) ‘Trump’s Foreign Policy Is No Longer Unpredictable’, *Foreign Affairs*, January 18: https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2019-01-18/trumps-foreign-policy-no-longer-unpredictable

Yarhi-Milo, Keren (2018) ‘After Credibility: American Foreign Policy in the Trump Era’, *Foreign Affairs* 97(1): 68-77.