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Crisis, Narratives, and the Construction of US-Middle East Relations: Continuity and Change in World History and Trump's America First

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This article lays out a novel theoretical conception of how we can analyse continuity and change in US foreign policy. Focusing on the US relationship with the Middle East, or West Asia, it places America's rise to power in the context of world history. It shows how the US has worked towards an imperium and deployed an imperial right over the long durée. It argues that the Trump administration has maintained this tradition, marking a considerable level of continuity in US foreign policy. However, by better understanding the role and impact of crises, it argued that analysts could be far more sensitive to the role of ideas and how reasons for action shape foreign policy. As a result, it is shown that the Trump administration adopts an America first policy-paradigm that moves away from a focus on free trade imperialism and towards indirect rule through authoritarian strongmen. This was a direct result of the Global Financial Crisis opening a period of paradigm contestation within the United States, and generating perceptions of American decline. To support this argument, the article uses advanced computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software to unpack the discursive-ideological formation of Trump's populist appeals. It demonstrates how dominating the Middle East is perceived by the Trump administration as a pathway to stopping relative American decline and engaging in a geopolitical struggle with China and Iran.

Keywords: Continuity, Change, Middle East, Foreign Policy, Crisis, Discourse
Analysis, Ideology, CAQDAS, Constructivism

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to outline a theoretically informed but empirically rich understanding of continuity and change in US foreign policy towards West Asia, by positing a social constructivist theory of foreign policy. Starting with a parsimonious overview, the article combines World History literature and International Relations scholarship to demonstrate continuities within the US relationship with West Asia. This provides a diachronic account of the US rise to power and the construction of an *imperium*, whereby policy-makers have sought to control their external environment. As part of this imperial enterprise, the US adopted the newly coined geo-strategic term 'Middle East' from the declining British Empire in the 1950s. However, policy-makers did not remove the residue of imperialism coaxed within the concept. Instead, they embraced its imperial heritage and the imperial right to shape the region towards their interests. Demonstrably, in the long *durée* of world history, the US rise to power was contingent on the ontological construction, and domination, of the Middle East. In praxis this operated firstly over decades of indirect rule, supported by regional authoritarians, and then, secondly, the informal modality of free trade at the turn of the twenty-first century.

Having provided the outlining of an overarching arc of continuity, this article moves forward by adding layers of theoretical complexity. This shows how we can be sensitive to change within particular synchronic moments. Ultimately, this is the first of this paper's main contributions, whereby the role of international crises is unpacked to reveal their impact on foreign policy continuity and change. Crises are moments of construction and contestation in the operation of policy-paradigms. In part, this draws on neo-institutionalist literature, but moves this forward by positing the role of discursive-ideological formations (DIF) that are sedimented in, and operated through, policy-paradigms. The importance of DIFs is that they function through articulation; joining ideas, concepts and social learning into identifiable narratives. We can, therefore, see narratives as an accessible bridge between DIFs and their operation through policy-paradigms. In times of crisis, therefore, the post-crisis narration is central to understanding contestation, variation and processes of change.

Operationalising this constructivist approach, this paper's second contribution is a concise narrative analysis of Candidate Trump's DIF using Computer Assisted Qualitative Analysis Software (CAQDAS). Undertaking a forensic narrative analysis of a large corpus of candidate Trump's speeches, whereby over three million words were coded by 'eye-balling' the data and then supplemented with a powerful mixed-model and text-mining functionality; identifying frequencies, patterns of articulation and collocations within the discourse. This analysis reveals a specific understanding of how crises can be operated for political gain, but also a narrative of American decline triggered by the Global Financial Crisis. The construction of *America First* as a policy-paradigm draws on a distinctive DIF, articulating a renewed growth of American power with the domination of the Middle East and its resources. This is absent any notion of democracy promotion or 'resizing' America's commitment to the region. The *America First* paradigm is openly reliant on authoritarian strongmen to facilitate indirect rule and ensure the renewal of American ascendancy while competing for regional domination against China and Iran.

The Rise of an Imperium and the Reification of Continuity

The long *durée* of world history reveals a macro movement that shapes the overall framework of this article. Namely, as the United States has grown in power, it has sought to shape its external environment (Davies 2013; Frankopan 2016, 215–342). The United States, as Richard Van Alstyne's seminal work makes clear, was founded upon the idea of '*an imperium* – a dominion, state or sovereignty that would expand in population and territory, and increase in strength and power' (1974, 1). Whilst its early commitment to a liberal character was unique, its drive for power was not. States have long sought to shape their external environments. This has been well documented since the Sumerian city-states started the global system between 4000-3500 BCE (Buzan and Little 2000). As Thucydides established in the *History of the Peloponnesian War*, perceptions of rising and fall within great powers matters in the global political order; as indeed more recently neo-classical realists have made clear. As states grow in relative power, they seek to shape and control their external environments. As they have declined, they have been less able to do so (see Rose 1998; Zakaria 1998). Not all, of course, have adopted a violent and predatory approach, succumbing to technologically enabled temptations and European levels of expansion, slavery and colonialism (Abu-Lughod. 1991; Halperin 2006).

The United States exemplifies this trend. A period of territorial expansion throughout the nineteenth century was accompanied by an active and aggressive foreign policy (Brauer 1984). Insightfully, as Zakaria explains, the 'resounding victory in the Spanish-American War crystallized the perception of increasing American power ... [and] America expanded dramatically in the years that followed' (1998, 11). The desire to shape and control its external environment spread beyond the Americas in the early twentieth century and focused on preventing a hostile regional hegemony emerging in Eurasia. Indeed, rather than making the world safe for democracy, control of West Asia has meant facilitating long-term alliances with authoritarian states and justified by references to *realpolitik*. In practise, the long *durée* of world history reveals an evolutionary pattern of Western imperial behaviour towards West Asia, transferred from European powers to the US as it rose to great power status in the twentieth century.

To justify the US imperium of West Asia, US policy-makers have needed to justify continued intervention and global leadership of this regional subsystem. Parsimoniously, this was done in two distinct steps. The first was to construct the *Middle East* as an ontological entity within the American sociological imagination. The second was to construct a *modus operandi* or set of rules for engaging this ontologically subjective reification.² Notably, the etymological moment of reification for the *Middle East* as a concept is easy to trace. It is to briefly review this construction and its articulation with Empire that we now turn.

The Ontological Construction of the Middle East

The concept of the *Middle East* is new within the context of world history. It simply did not exist until the late decades of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century. Indeed, some accounts place its emergence in the British India Office in the 1850s, in response to the growing expansionist rivalry between Britain and Russia (Beaumont,

² The term ontologically subjective is made in reference to a specific understanding of philosophical realism and social ontology as set out by John R. Searle (2007, 82–84).

Blake and Wagstaff, 2016: 1). Before this, there was a vague sense of 'oriental civilisations', itself emanating from the Napoleonic invasion of Egypt in 1798. Prior to the twentieth century, historical accounts from inside and outside the region referred to specific complex societies. Rather, the *Middle East* was developed as a new strategic concept by the British Empire. It was developed in an attempt to grapple with the so-called 'Eastern Question', the *near east* being the role of the Ottoman Empire in Europe, and the *far east* looking at the rise of China and Japan. Without delving too deeply into the fascinating twists and turns of history, by 1900, British policymakers were referring to *The Problem of the Middle East* in the Foreign Office (Voll 2014, 437–43).

The rationale for the term was set out by Alfred Thayer Mahan, who is often, albeit misleadingly, accredited with inventing the term.³ In brief, he sets out the need for British imperial rule over the 'middle East' by 'keep[ing] the particular protective relations already established with minor local rulers' (1902, 236). Controlling this new ontological entity was of paramount importance to Britain's great power status, and a strategic prize to be vigorously protected. As Mahan made clear, the advantages of British power and control over the 'middle East' were not to be abandoned 'except as the result of war' (1902, 239). Here we can see the etymology of the concept taking shape, and the *Middle East* constructed as an ontologically subjective product of global imperial ambitions. Mahan had captured the manner in which Britain had conceived the term through a logic of imperial strategy and control; not as a description of the culture or peoples of the region. The *Middle East*, as Burgess and Constantinou outline, is 'a space of colonial facilitation', that can be 'shrunk or expanded for different strategists at different periods, meaning that the region could include in its enlarged cartography also countries such as Greece, Somalia, Ethiopia and Pakistan' (2013, 368).

As Britain's relative power declined, the American century began, and the imperial baton was passed on. This set the stage for American interventions. The US had already established that accession to great power status was dependent on wedding control and access with a subsystem favourable to US interests. By 1947 the regions oil-producing states provided over half of the oil consumed by the US armed forces, and the CIA concluded that the region's oil was 'essential to the security of the United States' (Hahn 2005, 7). The region's oil was used to revitalise Western European economies, and as one US government report outlined at the time 'without petroleum, the Marshall plan could not have functioned' (in Yergin 1991, 424). The region's oil was facilitating an American led reshaping of the global political order and transforming the Eurasia continent. The US officially adopted the concept of the *Middle East* in 1958, even as the Department of State specified that it was 'indefinable' (Special 1958; Voll 2014). Far from being neutral, this ontologically subjective construction remained steeped in conceptual residual of European empire and power. It signified an adaptive subsystem to be controlled and shaped during America's rise to great power status.

Imperial rule(s) for the Subsystem

As influence over the West Asian subsystem transitioned from European powers to the United States in the 1950s, a level of what John Lewis Gaddis terms American 'hyperactivity' was established (1997, 167). At first, with substantial commitments elsewhere, there was a suggestion of extending NATO into the new *Middle East* or

³ It should be noted that Mahan was an American naval officer and historian.

establishing a similar regional entity. This was rejected, along with any notion of direct colonisation (Lewis Gaddis 1997, 168). Yet, cloaked within the reification of the *Middle East* is a *logic of domination* (Hassan 2013; Said 1994). Here, the work of philosopher James Tully is particularly insightful at capturing the continuous operating rules of this logic. Tully captures this succinctly in the notion of ‘the imperial right’;

This is the right of [Western] states and their companies to trade freely in non-[Western] societies and the duty to civilise non-European peoples, together with the duty of hospitality of non-[Western] peoples to open themselves to trade and civilisation. If indigenous peoples resist... and thus violate the international duty of hospitality, the imperial powers have the right and duty to impose coercively the conditions of trade, hospitality and civilisation ... [these] serve to legitimate the coercive imposition and protection of the legal and political conditions of western imperialisation on the non-west (2008, 210).

We can see the imperial right being applied to the Middle East through three modalities: colonization, indirect rule and informal rule. The first modality was colonization requiring the implantation of European settler colonies. The second, indirect rule, is based on ‘imperial powers establishing a small colonial administration or trading company to rule over a much larger indigenous population indirectly, by establishing a formal infrastructure of imperial law’ (Tully 2008, 211). Under this legal system, resistance is deemed illegal. In practice, as Mahan illustrated above, this relies on making unequal treaties and recognizing local rulers as quasi-sovereigns. The objective of this is to make sure that local elites are themselves dependent on imperial power, and willing to divide any internal opposition or resistance. This is the authoritarian strongman model of imperial control.

The third form of imperialism, that of ‘informal or free trade imperialism’ however is ‘one step beyond indirect rule’. It allows for self-rule but shapes self-determination through the informal hegemony requiring full access to resources, labour and markets to free trade (Tully 2008, 2012). Indeed, this is strongly reminiscent of G.W. Bush’s Freedom Agenda, and its focus on a ‘competitive liberalization strategy’ designed to harness free trade agreements as a modality of economic statecraft (Hassan 2013; Zoellick 2003). Throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, this logic of domination has structured the construction of the Middle East as a strategic object to be controlled. It has provided a modality of great power imperialism and provided an arc of continuity within the US rise to power. It is an evolutionary pattern of continuity within the long durée of world history. Notably, however, understanding this arc of continuity does little to help us recognize contemporary changes of policy or variation within this arc. It is to this that we now turn.

Crisis and Change in US Foreign Policy

Evidently, there has been considerable variation in US policy towards the West Asian subsystem, which is not captured by reference to the long durée. *Inter alia* the US rise to power and the decline of European empires changed the dynamics of the relationships, spurn on as they were by the dramatic repercussions of two world wars. For some, war is central to understanding change in foreign policy. Indeed, Paul Kennedy (1988) illustrates

at some length how war in the Western context has shaped the influence of great powers of the world system, as have other first-generation 'rise and fall' realists such as Robert Gilpin (1981). The later going so far as to argue that 'war historically has been the basic mechanism of systemic change ... and always will be' (1981, 209). Indeed, Bahgat Korany identifies the significant role wars have played shaping the 'Middle East state system' from the Arab-Israeli War in 1948 onwards (2011, 12). That wars produce systemic change is an important but insufficient explanation of foreign policy change. It operates at too high a level-of-analysis for our purposes. By necessity, foreign policy changes occur before wars happen; wars are a foreign policy decision, and therefore change in foreign policy precipitate wars. Wars are moments of punctuation that break evolutionary trajectories, but they are themselves a product of changing decisions by at least one state.

More fruitfully, we can see wars as a particularly devastating type of international *crises*, but not the only type of international crises. Crises are, in neo-classical realist terms, 'shocks' that change perspectives of relative power between states (Rose 1998). This certainly bridges some ground between realist and constructivist ontologies. However, crisis is a more fruitful concept for our minimal perspectivist, or 'thin' social constructivist, purposes. Etymologically, the term *crisis* is derived from medicine and drama. It signified a critical moment where an intensification of processes was needed to come to a resolution (Sztompka 1994, 34). This was reflected in Habermas' medical analogy, where the crisis was the moment of decision over whether to intervene in a patient's health in order to help them survive. As Habermas argues, 'The crisis cannot be separated from the viewpoint of the one who is undergoing it' (1975, 1). Crises are, to use John R. Searle's lexicon, '*observer-relative phenomenon*' that are socially constructed (Searle 1996). This is echoed by neo-institutionalists such as Colin Hay, whereby crises are,

a fusion of subjective perceptions and objective considerations ... 'Crisis'... literally 'to decide'- is a moment of decisive intervention, a moment of rupture and a moment of transformation (1996, 87).

Crises consist of both ontologically objective and subjective factors; they are intersubjective social constructions that facilitate political change. Here we can see a theoretical catalyst for institutional, and therefore foreign policy, change taking shape; uniting trends in neo-intuitionalist thinking with those in International Relations scholarship. As Stephen D. Krasner has shown, crises are important because 'new structures originate during periods of crisis' (1984, 240). The long *durée* may reveal the birth of modalities and patterns of policy continuation, but a constructivist conception of crises allows us to understand social change whereby crises punctuate the evolutionary rhythms of history. This allows us to draw a basic analytical distinction between 'periods of institutional creation and periods of institutional stasis' (Krasner 1984, 240). Understanding the role crises play in punctuating the evolutionary trends in world history allows us to make specific claims about the progression and tempo of political time; whether they be in the form of wars, pandemics, or financial crisis. It is to this that we now turn, so it is unavoidable to take the reader for a few paragraphs into the somewhat esoteric domain of the philosophy of social science.

Policy-Paradigms and Cybernetic Functions

The role crises play in the transformation of policy-making, and institutional change has been particularly well developed within neo-institutionalist literature since its key insights were fused with Thomas Kuhn's (1962) *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Hall 1993; Hay 2001). Kuhn outlined a social epistemology of the history of science. This formative work, challenging logical positivism, illustrated how science develops in a succession of *enduring paradigms* which are punctuated by periods of *revolutions*. Within revolutionary periods, the dominant paradigm is challenged and replaced. Subsequently, it is possible to distinguish a phase of 'normal science' in which a paradigm is ascendant and uncontested; providing an interpretive framework for 'routine puzzle-solving' and demarcating the boundaries and methods of scientific competence. However, an increased accumulation of 'anomalies' can challenge the prevailing paradigm. They produce a loss of confidence and create a period of 'exceptional' science, whereby over time some scientists reject the former paradigm's constraints in search of answers not provided by the old paradigm. This builds a period in which competing approaches emerge until a consensus can be created and institutionalised — establishing a new phase of normal science under a dominant new paradigm (Kuhn 1962).

Peter Hall demonstrates the application of this pattern of paradigmatic contestation in the policy-making arena. He argues that *policy-paradigms* function as interpretive frameworks whereby,

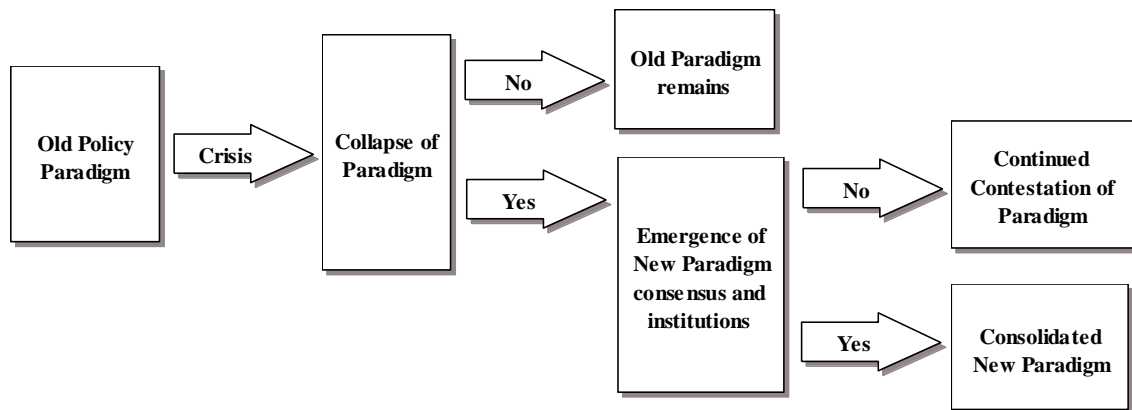
policymakers customarily work within a framework of ideas and standards that specifies not only the goals of policy and the kind of instruments that can be used to attain them, but also the very nature of the problems they are meant to be addressing ... this framework is embedded in the very terminology through which policymakers communicate about their work, and it is influential precisely because so much is taken for granted and unnameable to scrutiny as a whole (1993, 279).

Politicians and policy experts internalise policy-paradigms. They then act as a source of guidance for conducting and evaluating policies. The utility of this approach is that it provides a dialectic space for the intersubjective role of ideas in the construction of foreign policy. Ideas become central to the dynamic social construction of reality by helping to both reproduce continuity and spark change.

In ordinary periods of policymaking, policy-paradigms function cybernetically. Like Steinbruner's (1974) tennis player, policy-makers do not need to consciously make hundreds of mental calculations each time they make a decision. The summation of complicated calculations is already stored ready for performance. Intellectual labour has already been spent on constructing the policy-paradigm by *articulating* disparate concepts and perceptions together. However, in response to a crisis, a policy-paradigm needs to be defended through narration or allowed to die, whereby it will, over time, be surpassed by another policy-paradigm (see Figure One). The paradigms themselves are translated into policy narratives that coordinate action and are communicated to wider audiences. These provide the necessary feedback loops to complete the cybernetic action; whereby they can be held within a collective social intelligence and adapted through social learning. Crises act as moments of punctuation in the course of a policy paradigms functioning.

Crises open up periods of contestation so other paradigms can challenge the dominant policy-paradigm. This dynamic introduces considerable scope for miscalculation because policy-makers narrate crises by representing them and then responding to them. This creates a separation between the conditions that gave rise to the crisis and the response because the crisis narration need not be sophisticated or accurate in its understanding of the crisis context (Hay 2001, 204).

Figure One: Process of Continuity and Change within the Policy-Paradigms.⁴



Articulation and Discursive-Ideological Formations

With crisis narration being separated from the conditions that gave rise to the crisis, it is clear that reality and narratives do not necessarily have to mirror one another. Indeed, as the term cybernetic entails, ‘decision-makers have limited information processing capabilities. Instead of objectively searching all information for the best outcome, decision-makers will select an alternative that is acceptable’ or ‘good enough’ (Simon 1985). As Hall argues, there is so much there that is ‘taken for granted and unnameable to scrutiny as a whole’ (1993, 279). If Hall’s point is that it is possible to operate within a policy-paradigm and be unaware of its intellectual roots or overall structure, we should agree. We should not, however, accept the notion that policy-paradigms cannot be traced and unpacked. They are a product of complex social processes, and reliant on the intellectual labour of articulation. Thus, as Stuart Hall explains,

‘articulate’ means to utter, to speak forth, to be articulate. It carries that sense of language-ing, of expressing, etc. But we also speak of an ‘articulated’ lorry (truck): a lorry where the front (cab) and back (trailer) can, but need not necessarily, be connected to one another. The two parts are connected to each other, but through a specific linkage that can be broken (1996, 141).

To articulate, from the Latin ‘articulāre’, means to divide (meats etc.) into single joints. An ‘articulation’ refers to ‘a joint’ and a ‘setting of bones’. Thus, to articulate is to generate

⁴ Adapted from Hassan 2013.

a moment of 'fixity'. It is also a condition of creativity, whereby representations are chunked together, and cumulate into "network shaped" discursive-ideological formations. Discursive in the sense that they rely on systems of representation, and ideological to the extent that they produce 'ideology effects' born from the rule structure they seek to maintain. Such effects are 'ideological' to the extent that they pertain to 'relations of domination/subordination ... what makes some discourses ideological is their connection with systems of domination' (Purvis and Hunt 1993, 497). Intellectual tribalism aside, the crucial point to note here is how this 'operates systematically to reinforce and reproduce dominant social relations', or for our purposes, dominant modes of international relations (Purvis and Hunt 1993, 497).

The importance of introducing discursive-ideological formations to our analysis is that they allow for historical contingency, and are expressed in and through narratives. They can draw on fashionable ideas of the time, and articulate them with ones as old as human history. They can give different weight and shape to the same ideas giving context and variation on praxis; creating a dancing landscape of both continuity and change. It is, therefore, entirely possible for the same behaviour or core set of principles to be enacted or justified in different ways. This allows policy-makers to coalesce around policy-paradigms in broad or general agreement when nodes of meaning overlap. We do after all want to be 'secure', 'just' and 'free', even if we fail to agree on the meaning of these essentially contested concepts. Discursive-ideological formations help us understand how successive US administrations within the long *durée* can maintain an imperial right over the construction of the Middle East, (a continuous strand of behaviour or node in the discourse) and operationalise different policy paradigms (with elements of variation) (Hassan 2013). Just as the pieces of a kaleidoscope can be shaken to form everchanging patterns and views, the pieces are still contained inside the instrument; binding boundless possibility.

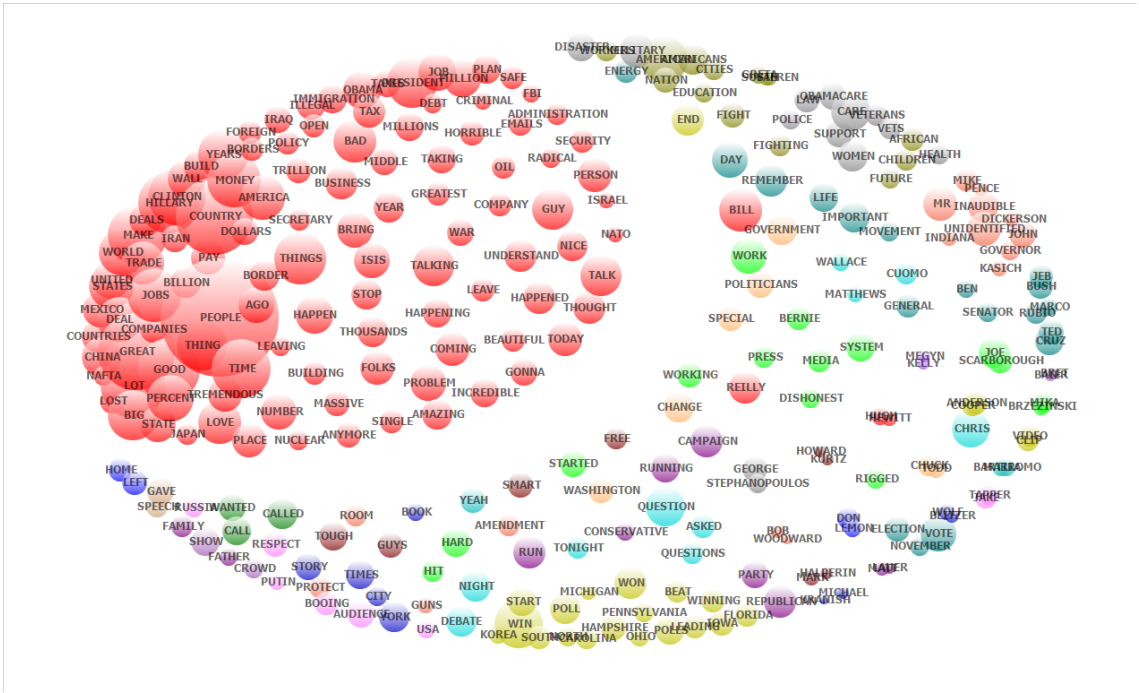
Methods: 'Reactivating' Discursive-Ideological Formations

To understand policy-paradigms, it is necessary to unpack the discursive-ideological formations informing them. This implies a particular set of methods. Not only is there a need to understand the articulation of concepts, but also their meaning and relationship with the methodology we have outlined. To assist in this, a corpus of candidate/President Trump's speeches was coded in the CAQDAS PROSuite. This was coded by "eyeballing" the data in QDAminer, in addition to subjecting the data to advanced content analysis and text-mining protocols in WordStat. This was designed to service the complex Husserlian objective of 'reactivating' the discursive-ideological formation sedimented into and reified by, the Trump administration's policy-paradigm. The account that follows is a distilled summation of those findings, which has systematically analysed a corpus of 3,114,973 words in total. This total includes over one-thousand transcriptions of campaign speeches and early Presidential speeches dating from 2015 through to 2017.⁵ This represents as complete a corpus as of public speeches as possible for this time period, compiled from news sources such as *CNN* and the *New York Times*, along with transcriptions of video content made by the researcher. Importantly, this time period was selected as it represented a crucial and formative period of the DIF before it was institutionalised into governance and disseminated as a wider policy-paradigm through

⁵ The campaign and Presidential documents were separated, so they could be analysed together and separately.

the apparatus of state. These methods made full use of advanced content analysis functions and the ability to visually represent data as a guide to the analysis. Given our focus on articulation, patterns and frequencies of co-occurrence were identified and turned into data visualizations to better engage with the data. These served as a proxy representation of the weight given to concepts within the DIF, and an indicator of meaning via collocational structuring. That is to say, how concepts are structured by the company they keep and articulated together to provide fixity. Instructively, this article accepts the long held hermeneutic notion that to understand the meanings of words in context, we should accept the simple premise that ‘words meanings can best be investigated through the analysis of repeated linguistic patterns in corpora’ (Brezina, 2018: 66). Herein, we can see in Figure Two a visualisation of the corpus data and embedded discursive relationships. This tells us, both the proximity of frequently used words in relation to one another, and the proportional usage of the words in the corpus. Through a forensic analysis it is possible to discern how concepts are articulated together to provide meaning, showing that DIFs are not arbitrary nor random, but emerge in and through repeated articulations. Moving forward, this is useful because it not only provides empirical evidence for the argument presented, but allows us to visually represents the pattern that emerges from over three million words and two and a half years of statements. It is against this background that the remainder of this article should be read.

Figure Two: Concept Map of Candidate Trump Corpus demonstrating Proximity and Proportion of Relative Frequency



The Global Financial Crisis, Trump and the West Asian Subsystem: The Return of Great power Rivalry

Discernibly, crises have played a significant role in shaping the US relationship with West Asia since the 1950s. From the Suez Crisis to the War on Terror, there have been notable moments of punctuated evolution shaping the relationship. Nonetheless, as a wider number of seminal studies have explained, it was the Global Financial Crisis of 2008, that set-in motion the conditions of policy-paradigm contestation within the US political system and the wider international system (Altman 2009; Kirshner, 2014; Tooze, 2018). The latent effect of this on West Asia, as a nested subsystem within the larger international system, was to attract renewed great power rivalry in the region. Indeed, following the financial crisis, China abandoned its 1955 policy of noninterference and sought to challenge American domination of West Asia. Over the last decade, China has increasingly sought to construct a non-US aligned block in a balance of power against US allies within West Asia. Iran is particularly important given its geographical location for the Belt and Road Initiative (Lyll 2019; MFAPRC 2013; Sun 2019; Yahya 2019). Also, since 2011, there has been renewed activism from Russia in the subsystem, most demonstrable in Syria but also throughout the Shia Crescent. This has contributed to tensions between powers competing to secure their professed interests. They have also fermented perceptions of relative decline in US power following the financial crisis. We can see this shift in the contrast between the unbound period of G.W. Bush's Freedom Agenda to remake the Middle East, through to Obama's 'resizing' or 'pivot' following the economic crisis (Hassan 2013; Lynch 2015). The Obama administration was attempting to reduce the costs of an overextended foreign policy in the region, even as this period of great power rivalry emerged. It is precisely perceptions of systemic US decline, however, that made the political impact of the global financial crisis so acute. It opened a period of exceptional policy-making, whereby new policy-paradigms were able to emerge and compete for dominance within the American political system. Trump's 'America First' has proved to be the primary competing paradigm; opening a period of considerable paradigm contestation.

The Trump Campaign and the Production of Crisis

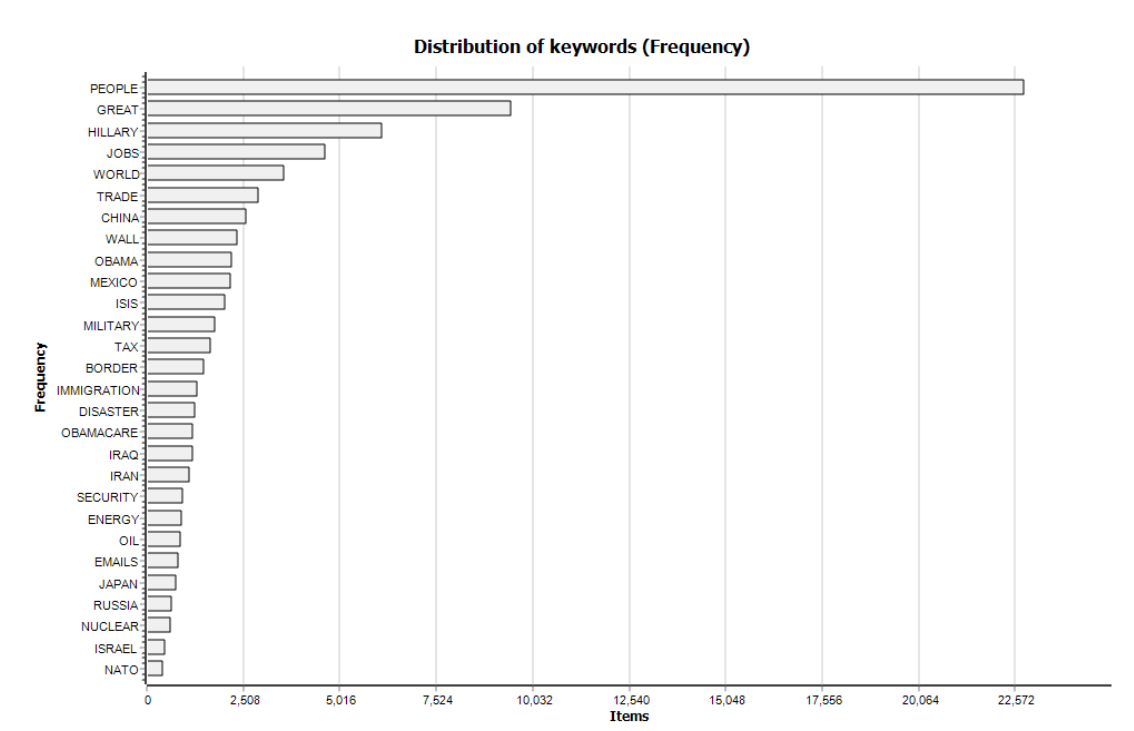
That the Financial Crisis created a moment of punctuation and subsequent policy-paradigm contestation is evident by taking a closer look at President Trump's presidential campaign corpus. This formative period provides a considerably transparent demonstration of the paradigm's emergence; "America First" did not emerge from nowhere, it was constructed in response to the crisis and communicated over time through the political process.⁶ Initially its underpinning DIF was explicitly articulated by Steve Bannon as a political and strategic response to, in his terms, "*The Crisis*" (Bannon 2010). Indeed, his 2010 documentary *Generation Zero* caricatures the Global Financial Crisis to justify the production of a deliberate "*crisis strategy*" following a "*financial*

⁶ Significantly, we can see this period as constructive, but as Complexity theory suggests we need to consider lag occurring within any complex adaptive system. This is consistent with Kuhn's theory and institutional theory more widely. Just as switching on the thermostat does not make a room instantly warm, paradigms take time to be constructed while they challenge dominant paradigms. As such, the time discrepancy between the crash and Trump's success is itself an indicator of paradigm contention rather than a challenge to the theory being presented.

Armageddon” that challenged America’s place in the world. Through a dystopian narrative, Bannon and many conservatives that would become central to the Trump administration, set out how the US is undergoing a “*cultural crisis*”. A “*crisis of trust*” has set in motion a “*crisis war*”. In response “*populism*” is needed to return “*moral hazard*” to the financial system in a “*crisis era*”. The power of government, it was argued, needs to be restored to “*the people*” and the “*forgotten man*” (Bannon 2010).⁷

Notably, the term ‘*people*’ is constructed in a nativist manner within the post-crisis narrative. This is strongly identifiable within the Trump campaign corpus, where it emerges as the dominant node from which much of the DIF is articulated and built upon (see Figures Two and Three). Not only is it the most frequently used keyword, but its meaning was shaped by the way it was used to construct simplified identities and roles within the post-crisis narrative.⁸ There were “American People”, “our people”, “their people”, “smart people”, “stupid people”, “good people”, “the right people”, “angry people” and most commonly “a lot of people”. The usage was not only designed to construct a ‘good’ inside and a ‘dangerous’ or ‘bad’ outside, but also to juxtapose those ‘stupid people’ responsible for the crisis and the ‘dangers’ of an American (often racially loaded) under-class. This method of demarcation is central to populism and tribal politics.

Figure Three: Distribution Frequency of Keywords in Candidate Trump Corpus



⁷ “Forgotten man” is used 23 times within the corpus, and of particular note is how candidate Trump notes that “*We* call them the forgotten man” — demonstrating collective social effort in the DIF construction.

⁸ The term *people* is disproportionately used 22953 times within the Corpus. The TF-IDF weight is 502.5. Standing for ‘term frequency–inverse document frequency’ this statistic provides a weight for the importance of terms within the corpus. The algorithm measures the importance of a term by working out term frequency rather than simply counting the usage of the term. The higher the TF-IDF score, the more important the term is within the corpus.

Repeatedly evident within the corpus is how traditional American elites were juxtaposed with Trump and Trump's representation of the American people. Central to the identity constructions, however, were articulations made between the concepts *people* and *money*. The later concept operated as a delineator. Trump was self-characterised as financially independent, whereas both the Republican and Democrat elite were dependent on financial contributions and detached from the people. The articulation of people and money also helped to shape understandings of broader social and international relationships and creates a transactional approach to social relationships. Gone were notions of American international leadership, replaced by a focus on *quid pro quo*:

If Germany and the **PEOPLE** and the folks from Europe aren't going to take a more active role -- why are we leading every charge, whether it's Ukraine or whether -- I mean everything we do, Iraq, who's taking there -- you know, we spent all of that **MONEY**.

The importance of this consistent and repeated articulation is its ability to delineate identities within a populist framework that is explicitly tied to the causes and consequences of the financial crisis.⁹ The articulation prescribes who to blame and what to do next. It facilitates the construction of a dystopian narrative where “a rigged system”¹⁰ is allowing the outside-in, facilitated by “globalists” and “immigrants” at the expense of the American worker and American power.¹¹ With Trump cast as the saviour in a time of crisis, he self-professed that ‘Wow, the economy is really bad! ... and getting worse ... Only I can fix’ (Trump, 2015). Accordingly, we should not see the DIF as arbitrary. It has been constructed by ‘a group of radical conservative thinkers’, many of whom would go on to be inside the Trump administration, such as ‘[Michael] Anton, Sebastian Gorka, Stephen Miller, and Julia Hahn’ (Hell and Steinmetz 2017, 388). They have sought to leverage socio-economic anxiety and fear to narrate a crisis in US hegemony, and a generate a ‘populist’ response what they have constructed as a time of exception. It is this dystopian narrative of American decline that is at the core of the “America First” paradigm.

Narrating Dystopia and Decline

The Trump campaign's narration of crisis and American decline was particularly pronounced within the data. Indeed, immediately after declaring his candidacy, Trump set out his platform to address American decline through a series of rhetorical questions:

When was the last time the U.S. won at anything? When was the last time we beat China or Japan in trade? Or Mexico at the border? Or anybody in negotiation? When was the last time we had a military victory that was so complete and total that the other side just said "We Quit!" It just doesn't happen for the U.S. anymore.

⁹ Money and People co-occur within the corpus 1003 times.

¹⁰ Rigged and System co-occur within the corpus 339 times

¹¹ The term ‘globalist’ is used four times within the corpus and is defined by Trump as ‘You know what globalists are? Who want to the strip the jobs and the wealth from our country and give them to every other country.’ The first usage was from Alex Jones, and Trump's trialling of the term was unsuccessful, yet tropes associated with it were frequent. Jobs for example are referred to 3284 times. The term immigrant was used 233 times.

This was not simply nostalgia. It was a rhetorical device to allow the Trump campaign to narrate America's declining global position. For Candidate Trump,

the world is becoming far more dangerous every day. Iran is racing towards developing nuclear weapons. China is exponentially expanding its military power, ISIS is beheading Christians simply for being Christian. In Benghazi, Islamic terrorists killed our diplomats without any consequences. Iran and ISIS, separately, are taking over vast areas in the Middle East and with it the largest oil reserves in the world.

This narrative skilfully tapped into long-held conservative fears, which had been slowly encroaching into the mainstream Republican Party. The financial crisis brought them to the foreground, bridged as they were with the rise of the Tea Party movement (Patenaude 2019). Candidate Trump's crisis narrative was premised on his victory delivering a 'comeback', and the return of jobs, prosperity, and a rising America; captured in the campaign slogan *Make America Great Again*.¹² As Figure Four demonstrates, this campaign slogan was by far the most used phrase in the campaign. However, it was reinforced with other significant tropes of ascendancy throughout the campaign such as 'make America safe again'¹³; 'make America strong again'¹⁴; 'make America wealthy again'¹⁵; and 'bring back our jobs'¹⁶ (see Figure Four).

The importance of this myth creation should not be underestimated. Indeed, rather than the realities of socio-economic factors being a good predictor of Trump voter behaviour, many notable studies have shown that a 'sense of decline', 'status threat', and 'White nostalgic deprivation', are better predictors of voter behaviour (Blum and Parker 2019; Gest, Reny, and Mayer 2018). Trump's crisis narrative was particularly fecund at tapping into pessimistic anxiety of decline and promising a return of US hegemony. This is a fundamental part of the DIF, underpinning the Trump administration's policy-paradigm. As Trump made clear in his inaugural speech, 'This American carnage stops right here and stops right now ... From this moment on, it's going to be America First' (D. J. Trump 2017).

¹² The TF-IDF weight for Make America Great Again is 242.2, with 700 occurrences within the corpus.

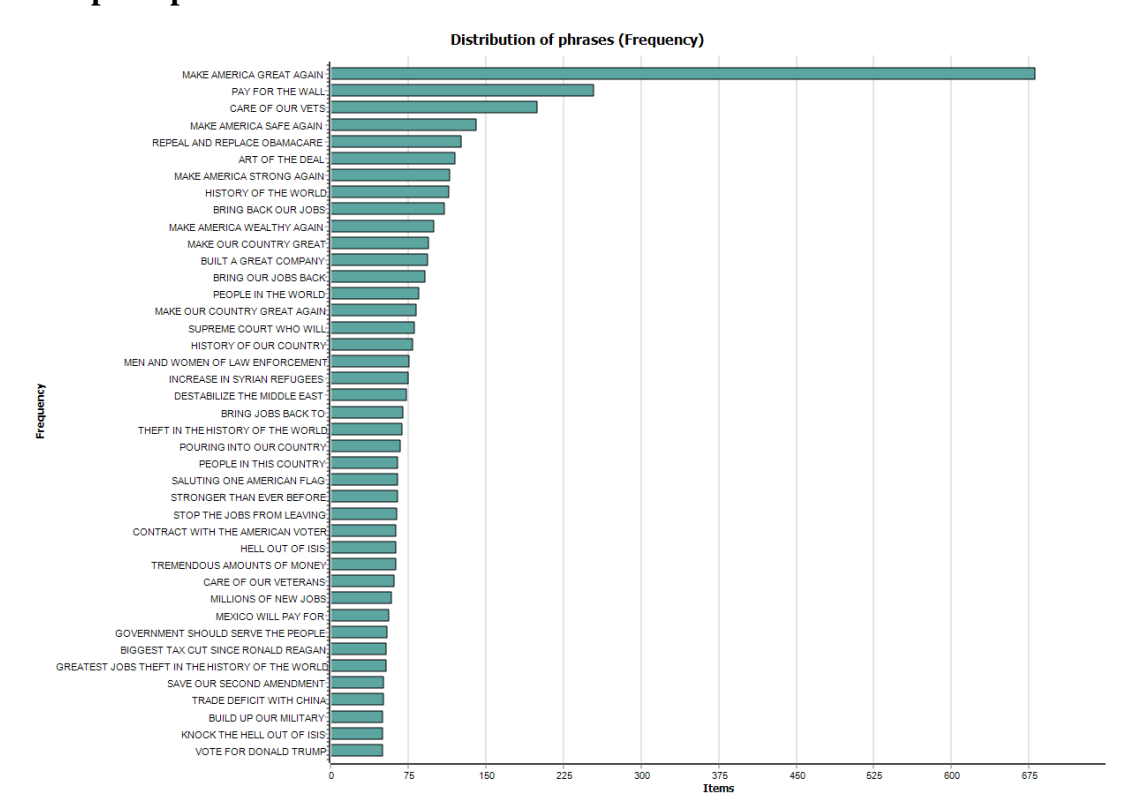
¹³ TF-IDF weight 119.8, with 142 occurrences.

¹⁴ TF-IDF weight 105.8, with 115 occurrences.

¹⁵ TF-IDF weight 101.2, with 100 occurrences.

¹⁶ TF-IDF weight 116.2 with 110 occurrences.

Figure Four: Distribution Frequency of Software Identified Phrases in Candidate Trump Corpus



Trump, America First and the Imperial Right: "Where's my favourite dictator?"

Pertinent to our analysis here, is how the America First paradigm, and its articulated construction of American decline, shapes the Trump administration's engagement with West Asia. The visible importance of West Asia within the DIF is evident in Figure Three; where terms such as ISIS, IRAQ, IRAN, OIL and ISRAEL appear in high frequency; in addition to being an important coded subset of the terms ENERGY, SECURITY, and NUCLEAR during the 'eyeballing' process. Simply put, the data shows us that prescriptions of American decline were consistently articulate with an imperial right over the Middle East. The data shows us that the DIF constructed the *context* in-and-through which President Trump's subsequent *conduct* can be understood. Whereas a long lineage of scholars, such as James Barber (2016 [1972]), have asserted a Presidential worldview based on a range of psychological factors, this analysis shows that an approximation of this can be discerned in an DIF and understood through a forensic analysis of the narrative; a crucial difference being the methodological shift from phenomenology to hermeneutics. It is because of this, that we can understand narrations of American decline (*describing what has happened*) prescribing a set of actions (*what should happen in response*) coalesced around the slogan 'Make America Great Again'. This is crucial to understanding the nexus between the data presented in this article and its overall argument. It had been argued of candidate Trump, that 'the press takes him literally, but not seriously; his supporters take him seriously, but not literally' (Zito 2016). Contrary to both, a forensic analysis of the DIF demonstrates, that during the campaign he was both serious and literal. It is this that helps us to understand how Trump's promise of renewed

American power was predicated on the imperial right over the Middle East; showing remarkable continuity with world history even if there is, as Edward Elgar would say, *a variation on an original theme*.

To demonstrate the relationship outlined above, between DIF, paradigm, context and conduct, it is important to illustrate a clear example. The simplest of these is with candidate Trump's repeated assertions about securing access to the region's oil wealth. Throughout the campaign, Trump frequently asserted America's right to 'take the oil', demonstrating a desire for an *imperium par excellence*.¹⁷ Within candidate Trump's corpus, this was not only articulated as a modality of counter-terrorism, cutting off a source of income for ISIS, but also a way of competing with Iran and China. As President, this has been a driving factor of Trump's Foreign policy in the region. For example, contrary to his own advisers, President Trump has repeatedly asserted the right to control Syrian oil. President Trump has used this articulation to rationalise a continued American troop presence:

We've secured the oil, and, therefore, a small number of U.S. troops will remain in the area where they have the oil. And we're going to be protecting it, and we'll be deciding what we're going to do with it in the future (Trump 2019).

Similarly, during the campaign, Iran was classified as a threat because it was trying to 'destabilise the Middle East' through 'sponsoring terrorism' while on the 'path to nuclear weapons'. These tropes were often articulated by reference to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) as 'the worst deal ever'.¹⁸ For candidate Trump, the JCPOA was highly representative of American weakness and relative decline. This laid the discursive tracks for the America First paradigm to legitimate the Trump administration withdrawing from the JCPOA in May 2018. This was combined with the imposition of sanctions, and a focus on Iranian oil exports; as oil was perceived to be central in the geopolitical power struggle over the region and the assertion of an imperial right.

Challenging Iran and China is central to the *America First* paradigm, as these powers contest the construction of an imperial right over the *Middle East*. For Trump, their relative ascendancy also symbolises America's relative decline. However, confronting the challenge to regional and great power involvement is problematic. Trump's dystopia sets out a vision of American offensive weakness exposed by the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq. A central element in the formation of the *America First* paradigm is the shadow of the Iraq war and the lessons being interpreted from it. It illustrates the high costs in blood and treasure. The wars also demonstrate the failures of the traditional political elites and their role in 'totally destabilising the Middle East'; outlining the risks of regime change. This articulates a vivid hyperbolic discourse. One that is capable of writing out the importance of the 2010 and 2011 revolutions within the subsystem. The revolutions were not narrated as a result of Arab agency, or rejection of authoritarianism, but articulated 'regime change' and American weakness:

¹⁷ Within Candidate Trump's Corpus, 'take', and 'oil' co-occur on 191 occasions out of the 393 times the term oil is used.

¹⁸ Within Candidate Trump's Corpus, this term appears on 202 occasions, concerning the JCPOA, but also towards Free Trade Agreements such as NAFTA.

Her [Clinton] push for **regime change** in Libya, Egypt and Syria has been a total and complete disaster. Her **Iraq** policy has been catastrophic. She's unleashed ISIS across the Middle East with her bad decisions and her bad judgment ... she's a **weak, weak** person. She doesn't have the strength ... Syria and Libya committing unspeakable inhuman atrocities and trying to launch attacks against the West. Iran meanwhile has been placed on the path to nuclear weapons, has become a true power. They've become a true power in the Middle East and beyond.

Within the *America First* paradigm, there is a tension between firstly, the imperial right's push for control and American ascendancy; secondly, renewed regional and international competition within the subsystem; and thirdly, America's unwillingness to act because of a perception of weakness and exposure to risk. These tensions not only define the Trump administration's goals and reasons for action, but also the instruments it is willing to utilise in their attainment.

We can see the impact of these underlying dynamics reified in Trump's approach to securing the imperial right. With history repeating itself, the Trump administration's first policy consideration was to construct an 'Arab NATO' (Detsch 2019). Echoing the 1950s, this was to somehow institutionalise America hegemony by bringing the Gulf powers together to balance against Iran and Chinese interventions. This was the *America First* paradigm trying to enact the imperial right within the parameters of a limited US commitment. Doomed to failure, the Trump administration all but abandoned this approach and embraced the indirect rule aspects of the imperial right. This is a logical corollary of the DIF. Appeals to 'informal or free trade imperialism' are not viable within the *America First* paradigm because of its rejection of globalisation and understanding of the financial crisis. If the Middle East is to be an object of domination, this is to be done by relying on strongmen for indirect rule, not the informal mechanisms of free markets. Whereas President's Bush and Obama relied on promoting free market mechanisms in the hope of creating modernisation, interdependence, and democracies leaning towards US interests, there is no avenue within Trump's DIF for this approach to be enacted within the America first paradigm (Hassan 2018). Herein, we can understand Trump's abandonment of any sentiments towards democracy promotion or 'resizing'. Just as Trump set out on the campaign trail, as President, the *America First* paradigm favours an unbridled embrace of the region's authoritarians willing to support the imperial right for their own regime survival and a renewed American ascendancy. This has allowed the House of Saud to act with impunity as long as it aligns with American interests; most spectacularly evident in the murder of the Saudi dissident and Washington Post columnist Jamal Khashoggi. This is mirrored in Egypt. As Trump would ask of Egyptian strongman Abdel Fattah El-Sisi "where's my favourite dictator?" (Youssef, Salama, and Bender 2019) The utility of indirect authoritarian rule outstrips the Islamophobia articulated within the DIF (see Eroukhmanoff 2018). Expressions that 'Islam hates us' are overlooked beyond the sea's edge, in favour of the imperial right and the renewed imperium of the United States. But of course, whilst Trump may have a different paradigm to previous presidents, his DIF shares the same appeal to an imperial right over the Middle East. The America First paradigm arose to contest globalisation and perceptions of American decline, but the data shows it has not abandoned the imperial right that characterises the long durée.

Conclusion

The article has sought to understand how the Trump foreign policy fits within the long *durée* of the US relationship with West Asia. To do this, it has sought to fuse and advance existing debates within constructivism and neo-institutionalism, and apply them to the analysis of foreign policy (Barnett 1999; Hassan 2012; Hay 2006; Kubalkova 2001; Onuf 1998). Ultimately, this has allowed us to distinguish between the *shape* of continuity and change in international politics, through the rise and fall of states and moments of crisis and paradigm contestation. Yet, it is in articulations of DIFs, and the narratives this gives rise to, that show us the *content* of continuity and change of state's foreign policy. Herein we can see how Trump's approach to West Asia fits within a broader understanding of history, even if the America first paradigm is distinctive. Our analysis of President Trump's DIF reveals that the imperial right continues to be a loadstar of US foreign policy in West Asia. It remains a continuous discursive node bridging the long *durée* with contemporary global politics. This is not coincidental. It is a direct product of American policy-makers perceiving the rise of their imperium as tied to the geostrategic orientation and control of the *Middle East*. We can see the strength of this continuity, as our diachronic account of world history resonates with our synchronic analysis of the Trump administration.

Through the added-value of our theoretically driven constructivist approach, we can see variation and contestation within this account generated by the global financial crisis. Trump is a post-crisis president. President's G.W. Bush and Obama favoured the informal mechanisms of free markets. Obama went so far as to allow the collapse of authoritarian allies in Tunisia and Egypt in 2010-2011 and attempted to resize American involvement in the region. Trump's 'America First paradigm' rejects this 'free market paradigm', in what is a continuing 'exceptional' period of policy-paradigm contestation. *America First* rejects free-market integration that is not heavily favourable to the ascendancy of the US, as a direct result of the financial crisis. It rejects 'globalists' and 'globalisation' as these are seen as contributing to America's relative decline. In the same vein, it also rejects allowing relative gains by those unfavourable to the US imperium or multilateral compromise in what is constructed as zero-sum games. As a result, it is a policy-paradigm that is directly confrontational with Iran and China. Conversely, it is also a paradigm that focuses on American weakness and the avoidance of military risk. This is a unique formation in post-war US foreign policy, whereby if it were to emerge as the paradigm of consensus, it would have a significant impact on the character of the global political order. If it was to be more deeply institutionalised within US foreign policy, then we should expect consolidations of authoritarianism under a populist banner. We can see this taking shape in West Asia, whereby *America First* is translated into unconditional support for authoritarian regimes, provided they renew American power and help 'Make America Great Again'.

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