Is US grand strategy dead?
The political foundations of deep engagement after Donald Trump

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International Relations scholars frequently warn that the American political system has become too fractured to sustain a coherent grand strategy. This perception generally rests on two premises: that President Donald Trump led an unprecedented assault on established principles of US foreign policy; and that Democrats and Republicans have become so polarized that they can no longer agree on a common vision for global leadership. These views have potentially dire implications, suggesting that the United States cannot be trusted to uphold its international commitments or to pursue a consistent set of foreign policy priorities. Charles Kupchan and Peter Trubowitz thus claim that ‘the political foundations of American internationalism have collapsed’. According to Daniel Drezner, Ronald Krebs and Randall Schweller, ‘grand strategy is dead’.

By contrast, this article argues that the grand strategy of deep engagement retains robust bipartisan support. It explains that, even though President Trump rejected more expansive conceptions of liberal internationalism, his behaviour was largely consistent with the prescriptions of deep engagement. Moreover, when Trump departed from deep engagement—as in questioning the US commitment to NATO—his actions did not reflect voters’ policy preferences. In fact, polling data indicate that bipartisan support for deep engagement is at least as strong today as it was during his presidency.

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as it has been at any other point since the end of the Cold War. Altogether, the article thus demonstrates that the grand strategy of deep engagement is less threatened, and more politically viable, than the conventional wisdom suggests.

The article takes no normative position on whether deep engagement is the right grand strategy for the United States to pursue. As the first section explains in more detail, deep engagement assigns limited priority to goals such as combating climate change, promoting democracy, expanding trade networks and enlarging the scope of international law. Deep engagement requires the United States to help defend allies from interstate aggression, but it does not demand the use of military force for purposes such as humanitarian intervention, regime change or nation-building. Since the end of the Cold War, every president besides Donald Trump has devoted substantial effort to pursuing goals that are not prescribed by deep engagement.5 Orientating US foreign policy around the principles of deep engagement would thus depart from historical trends. Yet that is different from saying that the United States has become so politically divided that it can no longer maintain a coherent grand strategy of any kind.

The article sets out its thesis in six steps. The first section defines the grand strategy of deep engagement and explains how that strategy differs from alternative visions of America’s role in the world, such as liberal internationalism. This distinction is crucial to the article’s argument, because it implies that recent controversies surrounding some elements of liberal internationalism have little direct bearing on the political solvency of deep engagement. The next four sections analyse President Trump’s behaviour and US public opinion with respect to the four core principles of deep engagement: maintaining US military superiority; providing security commitments to key allies; preserving open trade; and participating in rule-based international institutions. Each of these sections finds little evidence that the political foundations of deep engagement have collapsed. In many cases, political support for deep engagement appears to have risen, not fallen, in recent years.

The article’s sixth section discusses implications for policy and scholarship. For US policy-makers, the article’s argument suggests that the grand strategy of deep engagement is likely to remain politically viable for the foreseeable future (or, at least, more viable than many scholars and practitioners currently believe). For US allies, the article’s argument pushes back against warnings that the United States can no longer be trusted to provide global leadership, even if the scope of that leadership might not be as expansive as some foreign policy experts might like. For scholars of public opinion, the article shows that American citizens draw reasonable distinctions among different kinds of foreign policy commitments: for example, widespread frustrations with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have not discernibly diminished Americans’ desire to retain global military superiority or to honour longstanding security commitments. The article’s argument and evidence also emphasize the importance of distinguishing deep engagement from other grand strategies when analysing the future of America’s role in the world.

particular, the article shows that scholars’ tendency to conflate deep engagement with more expansive conceptions of liberal internationalism has generated excessive pessimism about the political foundations of US grand strategy.

Deep engagement and its alternatives

A grand strategy is a conceptual framework that explains how nation-states can employ the instruments of foreign policy to advance their core interests. This article’s analysis focuses on the grand strategy of deep engagement, as articulated by Stephen Brooks and William Wohlfforth in their 2016 book America abroad. This strategy has four core elements.

First, deep engagement requires the United States to maintain sufficient military power to defeat any state that attempts to dominate an important region of the world. During the Cold War, this objective primarily involved stopping a potential Soviet attack on western Europe. Today, deep engagement requires the ability to contain prospective Chinese aggression in east Asia. Russia and Iran also pose plausible threats to the regional stability of Europe and the Middle East, respectively. Deep engagement demands that the United States maintain sufficient capabilities to deter bids for regional hegemony in all these areas simultaneously. By contrast, proponents of the grand strategies of restraint and offshore balancing believe that the United States could remain secure even if it substantially reduced its military capabilities.

The second core element of deep engagement is providing security commitments to allies. These commitments aim to reduce the risk of interstate conflict by deterring hostile states from attacking rivals whose militaries are backstopped by US power. These security commitments discourage allies from participating in regional arms races or bandwagoning with rising powers. They also grant the United States useful political leverage in working with allies. The most important security commitments for these purposes are US membership in NATO, which is intended to maintain regional stability in Europe, and mutual defence treaties with several Pacific countries (Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Thailand, Australia and New Zealand), which aim to deter potential aggression from China. By contrast, proponents of restraint and offshore balancing argue that

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10 Brooks and Wohlfforth, America abroad, pp. 88–102.
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the United States should disengage from these alliances, on the grounds that they are not necessary for maintaining US national security. 14

The last two core principles of deep engagement are that the United States benefits from protecting networks of global trade and finance, as well as participating in rule-based international institutions. After the Second World War, the United States worked with other countries to build these networks and institutions in order to ‘lock’ other states into patterns of cooperation and dispute resolution. These networks and institutions help to preserve international stability and to promote economic prosperity while granting the United States disproportionate influence in coordinating interstate relations. 15

The grand strategy of deep engagement is expensive. The United States currently spends roughly $750 billion per year on national defence, and more than $1 trillion on its foreign policy agenda overall. 16 Yet the political objectives of deep engagement are also limited. As Brooks and Wohlforth describe it, deep engagement’s ‘main aim is defensive: to prevent a much more dangerous, unstable world from emerging and to forestall the breakdown of cooperation regarding the global economy and other issues of great importance to the United States’. 17

Generally speaking, the grand strategy of deep engagement does not require the construction of new forms of international cooperation or attempts to promote global political change. Deep engagement thus excludes many of the most significant and most controversial US foreign policies in recent memory, such as NATO enlargement, humanitarian intervention in Libya and the Iraq War. Deep engagement requires the United States to preserve existing networks of global trade and rule-based institutions, but it does not demand that US leaders continually expand those networks. Recent controversies surrounding proposals to extend free trade through the Trans-Pacific Partnership or to join the International Criminal Court thus fall outside deep engagement. 18

Other grand strategies adopt more expansive political objectives. For example, proponents of liberal internationalism assume that the United States benefits from spreading democracy, expanding trade, enlarging alliances, strengthening international institutions and extending the scope of international law. 19

16 Office of Management and Budget: https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/hist0322_fy2023.xlsx. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 6 May 2022.)
18 For discussions of which foreign policy commitments fall outside the parameters of deep engagement, see Brooks and Wohlforth, America abroad, pp. 7, 73–4, 82–3, 150–1.
19 See e.g. G. John Ikenberry, Liberal Leviathan: the origins, crisis, and transformation of the American world order (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011); G. John Ikenberry and Anne-Marie Slaughter, eds, Forging a world of liberty under law (Princeton: Princeton Project on National Security, 2006). For a rigorous overview of the distinctions between deep engagement and liberal internationalism, see Paul C. Avey, Jonathan N.
internationalists thus encourage the United States to use its power to construct new forms of international cooperation and to promote global political change in a manner that goes beyond deep engagement’s primarily defensive goal of forestalling the breakdown of global security and economic cooperation. President Bill Clinton’s concept of ‘democratic enlargement’—which included expanding NATO and deepening US trade relations with China—provides a clear example of a foreign policy agenda that was inspired by expansive conceptions of liberal internationalism, and therefore involved making international commitments that deep engagement did not require. 20

There are several indications that the political foundations of liberal internationalism have weakened in recent years. Recent polling data show that Americans have a limited appetite for expanding trade or promoting democracy; Democrats and Republicans sharply disagree on the importance of combating climate change, strengthening the UN, assisting refugees and a host of other issues traditionally associated with liberal internationalism. 21 Meanwhile, President Trump explicitly rejected liberal principles as a foundation for US foreign policy, articulating a nationalist, ‘America First’ agenda, expressing admiration for authoritarian leaders, and withdrawing the United States from several of Barack Obama’s signature efforts to promote global cooperation, such as the Paris Climate Agreement, the Trans-Pacific Partnership and the Iran nuclear deal. 22 Yet these challenges to liberal internationalism do not automatically imply that the grand strategy of deep engagement is also politically embattled. To show that, one must evaluate the political foundations of deep engagement in their own right.

International Relations scholars nevertheless frequently conflate deep engagement with liberal internationalism or omit deep engagement altogether when analysing the politics of US grand strategy. For example, the 2021 Oxford handbook of grand strategy uses the term ‘deep engagement’ as shorthand for maintaining US military superiority, without distinguishing deep engagement’s political objective of forestalling a breakdown of global order from liberal inter-

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nationalists’ visions of promoting global political change. Brian Burgoon and Peter Trubowitz’s 2022 article on ‘The retreat of the West’ uses the term ‘liberal internationalism’ to describe all grand strategies that combine military power with international partnership, including deep engagement. A 2018 collection of essays examining Donald Trump’s foreign policy contains an entire section of contributions examining the implications of his presidency for the future of liberal internationalism, but mentions the term ‘deep engagement’ only twice—and in both cases, it is used as a synonym for liberal internationalism.

This elision of deep engagement and liberal internationalism may reflect the fact that contemporary scholarship on grand strategy overwhelmingly revolves around the question of whether the United States should retrench its military posture. Since proponents of deep engagement and liberal internationalism sit on the same side of this debate, they have little reason to parse their differences. Yet the rest of this article demonstrates that those differences matter for analysing the politics of US foreign policy. By focusing on recent controversies surrounding some elements of liberal internationalism—and without directly evaluating the political viability of deep engagement—many scholars and practitioners have developed overly pessimistic views about Americans’ ability to reach bipartisan agreement on principles for US grand strategy.

To support this argument, the following sections examine deep engagement’s four core requirements. Each section presents polling data showing that deep engagement’s principles retain robust bipartisan support. In most cases, we will see that President Trump’s hostility towards liberal internationalism did not also entail direct challenges to the tenets of deep engagement. Together, these empirical analyses refute common perceptions of the collapse of American internationalism or the death of grand strategy. Instead, the article’s analysis suggests that the political foundations of deep engagement have remained relatively robust in the face of leadership changes and domestic turmoil.

26 For example, the subtitle of the paperback version of Brooks and Wohlfirth’s America abroad is Why the sole superpower should not pull back from the world. As the authors explain in their prologue to that edition, their arguments against retrenchment address what is arguably the central question in contemporary debates about US grand strategy. However, that framing also draws attention away from important differences between deep engagement and more expansive conceptions of liberal internationalism. An earlier version of Brooks and Wohlfirth’s argument draws no explicit distinction between deep engagement and liberal internationalism: see Stephen G. Brooks, G. John Ikenberry and William C. Wohlfirth, ‘Don’t come home, America: the case against retrenchment’, International Security 37:3, 2012–13, pp. 7–51. One recent review of arguments for strategic retrenchment portrays that position as challenging the tenets of liberal internationalism, without mentioning deep engagement. See Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry, ‘Misplaced restraint: the Quincy coalition versus liberal internationalism’, Survival 63:4, 2021, pp. 7–32.
27 The article’s analysis of public opinion reflects a systematic study of relevant polling questions in the Roper Center’s iPoll database, supplemented with reviews of regular reporting from Pew, Gallup and the Chicago Council on Global Affairs. Where possible, iPoll data are cited to original sources.

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Maintaining US military superiority

The previous section described how the grand strategy of deep engagement requires the United States to maintain global military superiority. Proponents of alternative grand strategies, such as restraint and offshore balancing, argue that the United States should instead significantly reduce its military capabilities. But American voters do not want to do that.

According to Gallup’s polling data, only one-third of Americans currently believe that the US defence budget is too large.\(^{28}\) This proportion has steadily declined since the Iraq War, when 44 per cent of Americans supported cutting military expenditures. Meanwhile, Gallup’s data show that 50 per cent of voters—an all-time high—currently say that overall levels of US military spending are ‘about right’.\(^{29}\) Democrats are typically more willing than Republicans to support cutting the defence budget, but data from both Pew and the Chicago Council on Global Affairs show that a majority of Democrats have not supported cutting the defence budget since the early 1990s. These data also provide little indication that Democrats have grown more likely to demand cuts to the defence budget in recent years.\(^{30}\)

Americans continue to attach a high priority to the goal of staying the world’s strongest military power. The 2021 Chicago Council survey found that 57 per cent of Americans think it is very important for the United States to ‘maintain US military superiority’ over other countries, with just 9 per cent of voters saying that this objective is unimportant.\(^{31}\) A 2021 Pew poll similarly found that 60 per cent of Americans think that ‘United States policies should try to keep it so America is the only superpower’, with just 36 per cent saying instead that ‘it would be acceptable if another country became as militarily powerful as the United States’.\(^{32}\) The Chicago Council and Pew have obtained nearly identical responses every time they have asked these questions since 1995, showing that Americans’ support for military primacy has remained consistent despite the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the 2008 global financial crisis and the rise of populist nationalism.

Meanwhile, defence spending is one area in which President Trump clearly did not pose a threat to the grand strategy of deep engagement. When Trump entered office in 2017, the United States government spent $599 billion on national defence, a figure that Barack Obama had held roughly constant during his second term as

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29 Jones, ‘Record high say US defense spending is “about right”’.
32 Hannah Hartig, ‘Younger Americans still more likely than older adults to say there are countries better than the US’, Pewresearch.org, 16 Dec. 2021, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/12/16/younger-americans-still-more-likely-than-older-adults-to-say-there-are-other-countries-better-than-the-u-s/.
president. When Trump left office in 2021, the United States spent an estimated $748 billion on national defence. The Pentagon used these additional resources to improve military readiness, to expand the navy, and to restore war-fighting capabilities that had been eroded during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. These changes may not have been cost-effective—even Trump once said it was ‘crazy’ to spend so much money on national defence—but there is little doubt that they helped to bolster US military superiority.

All of the trends described in this section are inconsistent with arguments that the political foundations of deep engagement have collapsed. American support for maintaining military superiority appears at least as strong as at any point since the end of the Cold War. And, despite claims that President Trump ‘frontally reject[ed] all the pillars of what he took to be the bipartisan establishment’s foreign policy’, he took concrete steps to bolster this aspect of deep engagement.

Upholding America’s security commitments

President Trump adopted an unusually abrasive posture towards US allies. This was arguably the most controversial element of his foreign policy, and it is one of the principal reasons why many International Relations scholars accused Trump of undermining US grand strategy. For example, Trump said in January 2017 that he thought NATO was ‘obsolete’ because it did not do enough to fight terrorism. In May 2017, Trump dodged a question at a press conference asking whether he would publicly affirm the United States’ commitment to defend other NATO members from attack. In an interview of July 2018, Trump said he thought it was strange that the NATO alliance obliged the United States to defend ‘tiny’ countries like Montenegro. Trump also repeatedly criticized allies for not devoting sufficient resources to their own defence.

Trump’s critics argue that his rhetoric diminished the credibility of US security commitments in a manner that emboldened America’s adversaries while weakening allies’ faith in those security commitments. And there is little doubt

33 Adjusted for inflation (constant 2020 dollars), these figures would be $647 billion and $748 billion, respectively.
42 See e.g. Keren Yarhi-Milo, ’After credibility: American foreign policy in the Trump era’, Foreign Affairs 97: 1,
that Trump’s harsh rhetoric towards NATO departed from the principles of deep engagement. Yet there are two reasons why Trump’s controversial relationship with NATO does not indicate that the political foundations of deep engagement have collapsed.

First, Trump did not materially reduce America’s commitment to NATO. Throughout Trump’s presidency, the United States continued to conduct regular military exercises with NATO members, held frequent bilateral meetings with allied leaders, approved NATO membership for Montenegro and North Macedonia (which meant that Trump was actually responsible for extending US security commitments to cover those ‘tiny’ countries), and increased funding for the European Deterrence Initiative. For that reason, many observers consider Trump’s NATO policy to have been relatively continuous with that of his predecessors. The degree to which Trump challenged NATO was certainly nothing near to what proponents of strategic retrenchment would prefer. Indeed, Trump explicitly rescinded many of his controversial statements about NATO, declaring the alliance to be the ‘cornerstone’ of transatlantic security and explicitly affirming America’s commitment to defend other NATO members from attack.

Second, and more importantly for this article’s purposes, Americans disapproved of President Trump’s rhetoric towards NATO. For example, a May 2017 poll conducted by Quinnipiac University found that 88 per cent of Americans said it was either very important or somewhat important for Trump to reaffirm America’s commitment to defend other NATO members. Another Quinnipiac poll, a year later, also found that 88 per cent of Americans said it was important for the president of the United States to be ‘publicly supportive of allies’. Thus, at the same time as Trump was issuing controversial statements about America’s security commitments, voters were reporting the opposite inclinations.

Other polling data show that Americans possess overwhelmingly favourable views of NATO. A 2021 Pew poll found that 71 per cent of Americans think the United States benefits ‘a great deal’ or ‘a fair amount’ from NATO membership; and the 2020 Chicago Council survey found that 73 per cent of Americans support preserving the alliance. A 2022 Gallup poll shows that only 28 per cent of Repub-

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licans and 7 per cent of Democrats think that the United States should decrease its commitment to NATO.\textsuperscript{50} And while Americans’ views towards NATO have become more polarized across party lines since the start of the Trump presidency, that trend is almost entirely a result of Democrats becoming more favourable towards the alliance, rather than any erosion of Republican support.\textsuperscript{51} This pattern suggests that Trump’s rhetoric towards NATO may have backfired, stimulating his political opponents to become even more committed to the alliance without shifting his own party’s views.\textsuperscript{52}

Majorities of Americans consistently say they would be willing to use US troops to defend NATO allies. For example, the 2021 Chicago Council survey found that 59 per cent of Americans would use US troops to defend Latvia, Lithuania or Estonia from a Russian attack (a proportion which has steadily increased over the past decade).\textsuperscript{53} Pew’s data show that 60 per cent of Americans support deploying troops to stop Russia from attacking an unspecified NATO neighbour (and indicate that this proportion has remained relatively stable in recent years).\textsuperscript{54} Meanwhile, Americans have vigorously backed the Biden administration’s efforts to counter Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. For instance, according to the Brookings Institution, 85 per cent of Republicans and 95 per cent of Democrats supported Biden’s sanctions on Russia.\textsuperscript{55} Even though Ukraine is not a NATO ally, and the United States is thus not obliged to uphold that country’s security, Americans nevertheless appear to be willing to bear substantial costs in this case to oppose interstate aggression. If anything, voters have criticized Biden for not doing enough to bolster Ukraine’s defences.\textsuperscript{56}

The story is similar with respect to Trump’s posture towards US allies in east Asia, where Trump criticized partners for not ‘paying their fair share’,\textsuperscript{57} and suggested he might abrogate US security commitments, but ultimately left those commitments in place.\textsuperscript{58} The Chicago Council’s 2021 data show that 63 per cent of both Republicans and Democrats were willing to use US troops to defend Japan.

52 Another interpretation is that Trump’s rhetoric towards NATO was simply half-hearted—perhaps intended as a gambit to gain leverage in bargaining over intra-alliance resource commitments rather than a concerted effort to diminish domestic support for US–NATO relations.
53 Smelz et al., Foreign policy for the middle class, p. 31.
54 Fagan and Poushter, ‘NATO seen favorably across member states’. For time trends, see iPoll questions 3111681.00006, uspsra.052378.g.01e, and uspsra.061015.r53.
58 Moreover, even though America’s allies in east Asia found Trump’s rhetoric alarming, they also reportedly
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of Americans would use US troops to defend South Korea from a North Korean attack, that 52 per cent of Americans would send troops to defend Taiwan from a Chinese invasion, and that both of these figures have grown steadily in recent decades.\(^{59}\) A 2017 Pew survey similarly found that 58 per cent of Americans would support using military force ‘if one of our allies in Asia, such as Japan, South Korea, or the Philippines got into a serious military conflict with China’.\(^{60}\)

Thus, while Trump’s behaviour may well have damaged America’s relationships with its allies, there is little indication that the American political system has become too fractured to sustain this pillar of deep engagement. His challenges to US security commitments lay primarily in the realm of rhetoric and were largely rejected by Americans and renounced by Trump himself. Meanwhile, Americans’ willingness to uphold those security commitments appears to be rising, not falling.

Protecting free trade

Trade policy is an area where it is particularly important to distinguish the grand strategy of deep engagement from more expansive conceptions of liberal internationalism. As described in the article’s first section, deep engagement requires the United States to protect global commerce from widespread upheaval. By contrast, liberal internationalists generally argue that the United States should work to expand the scope of free trade.

This distinction is crucial for analysing the contemporary politics of US grand strategy. While recent controversies surrounding policies such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership show that American voters are currently hesitant about enlarging open markets, there is little indication that they wish to uproot trade networks in a manner that would threaten the grand strategy of deep engagement. The most relevant data on this issue come from the 2020 Chicago Council survey, which asked voters to say whether they thought the US government should devote more or less effort to various areas of foreign policy. These data showed that a minority of voters—32 per cent of Republicans and 47 per cent of Democrats—thought the United States should sign more free trade agreements with other countries. Yet just 19 per cent of Republicans and only 12 per cent of Democrats thought the United States should have less free trade with other countries.\(^{61}\)

Meanwhile, the 2021 Chicago Council survey found that majorities of Americans think free trade is good for consumers (82 per cent), for their own standard of living (79 per cent), for the US economy (75 per cent) and for creating jobs in

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\(^{59}\) Smeltz et al., Foreign policy for the middle class, p. 31.


\(^{61}\) Smeltz et al., Divided we stand, pp. 20, 27. Meanwhile, a minority of both parties’ voters (43% of Republicans and 16% of Democrats) think the United States should place higher tariffs on other countries’ goods.

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the United States (60 per cent). All of these proportions increased during Trump’s presidency and are now higher than baseline levels from 2004 and 2006, which were the last times that the Chicago Council posed those questions prior to 2016.62 Chicago Council surveys also show that the proportion of Americans who attach a high priority to reducing the trade deficit has steadily declined over the past three decades.63 A 2020 Gallup survey found that an unprecedented proportion of Americans—more than three-quarters of both Republicans and Democrats—saw foreign trade as an ‘opportunity for economic growth’ rather than a ‘threat to the economy’. These levels have consistently grown over the past ten years, after hovering around 50 per cent from 1990 to 2010.64 Meanwhile, a 2020 AP poll found that just 39 per cent of voters support new import restrictions,65 while a 2019 FoxNews poll found that just 31 per cent of Americans think that tariffs help the economy.66 All of these data refute common claims that American voters have become hostile to free trade.

Distinguishing deep engagement’s emphasis on preserving trade from liberal internationalism’s ambitions to expand trade is also important for evaluating the Trump administration’s behaviour. Though Trump was widely portrayed as being ‘anti-trade’,67 US trade flows did not significantly decline during his presidency. Compared to Barack Obama’s last four years in office, the inflation-adjusted value of US trade declined by less than 1 per cent while Trump was in the White House.68 That figure incorporates data from 2020, when global supply chains were severely disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. If trade patterns had remained constant from 2019 to 2020, then Trump’s presidency would have witnessed a 3 per cent real increase in US trade flows.69

62 Meanwhile, a 2020 Monmouth poll found that 57% of voters think that free trade agreements with other countries are good for the United States as a whole (Patrick Murray, ‘Little opposition to USMCA’, Monmouth University Polling Institute, 28 Jan. 2020). A January 2020 Pew poll found that 69% of Americans say free trade is good for them personally (iPoll: 3117050.00040), while a Politico poll of December 2020 found that 60% of voters say it is ‘extremely important’ to encourage more free trade in the near future (iPoll: 3118518.00009).

63 According to Chicago Council annual surveys, the proportion of Americans assigning a high priority to this objective has declined from 62% in 1986 to 50% in 1998 to 42% in 2018. See https://www.thechicagocouncil.org/research/lester-crown-center-us-foreign-policy/chicago-council-survey.


69 The real value of US trade decreased by 13% from 2019 to 2020 (US Census Bureau). This decline cannot be attributed to Trump’s tariffs on China, as the overall value of US–China trade decreased by less than 1% in real terms between 2019 and 2020.
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The only area in which Trump significantly constrained US trade involved imposing tariffs on China as part of the so-called ‘trade war’. However, the trade war does not provide compelling evidence that the political foundations of deep engagement have collapsed. Trump’s stated purpose for imposing tariffs on China was not to protect American industries from Chinese competition, but rather to sanction Beijing for practices that are widely viewed as undermining rule-based trade, such as currency manipulation and intellectual property theft. Pressuring China to stop these practices was thus plausibly consistent with the strategic goals of deep engagement. Trump’s decision to impose unilateral sanctions on China certainly marked a break with deep engagement’s emphasis on the importance of working with allies and international institutions to resolve disputes. Yet that behaviour reflected Trump’s broader rejection of multilateralism—which the article’s next section discusses in more detail—rather than attitudes that were hostile towards trade per se.

Working with international institutions

President Trump’s antagonism towards international institutions was the area in which his foreign policy most clearly deviated from the principles of deep engagement. Trump was outspoken in his scepticism about international institutions. And, in contrast to his behaviour in the domain of alliance politics, in this area Trump actually translated his rhetoric into action. For example, he cut off US support for the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the UN Human Rights Commission; he withdrew support for the World Health Organization; he cut US funding for the Organization of American States; he unilaterally blocked appointments to the WTO’s court of appeals; and he applied sanctions to the International Criminal Court. And, as mentioned above, Trump chose to place tariffs on China unilaterally, rather than attempting to resolve that dispute through international institutions, such as the WTO.

Trump’s actions almost certainly damaged America’s standing with other countries and international institutions—and yet there are two principal reasons why this does not imply that the political foundations of deep engagement have collapsed. The first of those reasons is that friction between the United States and international institutions is not new. In 1972, for example, President Richard Nixon unilaterally abrogated the Bretton Woods monetary system by taking US trade in goods with China decreased by 3% during Trump’s presidency (US Census Bureau).


And even this claim requires assuming that other states would be willing to bear the economic and political costs of joining multilateral action against China, which is not at all obvious.

On Trump’s hostility towards international institutions—and multilateral cooperation more generally—see Ivo Daalder and James Lindsay, The empty throne: America’s abdication of global leadership (New York: PublicAffairs, 2018), pp. 91–137; Mira Rapp-Hooper, Shields of the republic: the triumph and peril of America’s alliances (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020), pp. 156–75; Ikenberry, A world safe for democracy, pp. 2–3.
currency off the gold standard and by imposing an import surcharge that forced other countries to revalue their currencies against the dollar.\textsuperscript{74} In 2003, President George W. Bush invaded Iraq without UN approval.\textsuperscript{75} America’s extensive history of covert regime change operations shows that US presidents have repeatedly violated international law when they found that to be in the nation’s interests.\textsuperscript{76} In order to claim that President Trump’s hostility towards international institutions heralded the demise of deep engagement, one would need to show that his violations were substantially more damaging than prior episodes, or that his behaviour strained US relations with international institutions past some irreversible breaking point. I am not aware of any research that rigorously documents those claims.

Moreover, public opinion data show that Trump’s behaviour did not reflect Americans’ policy preferences. The most consistent polling data on this subject involve voters’ perceptions of the UN. These data show that Americans do not think the UN is particularly effective: for example, a 2021 Gallup poll found that just 45 per cent of Americans think that the UN is doing a good job. Yet that number has increased steadily since the start of the Iraq War. Meanwhile, recent Gallup data show that 66 per cent of Americans think the UN plays a ‘necessary’ role in world politics; that 66 per cent of Americans say the UN should play either a ‘leading role’ or a ‘major role’ in world affairs; and that 63 per cent believe it is very important to work with the UN in order to ‘bring about world cooperation’.\textsuperscript{77}

Pew surveys reveal similar trends. Today, Pew finds, 59 per cent of Americans have a favourable view of the UN, a figure that has also increased since the Iraq War. Pew’s data show a widening partisan gap in Americans’ perceptions of the UN, but that is only because Democrats have steadily become more favourably inclined towards the organization (shifting from 60 per cent approval to 80 per cent approval over the past 15 years), whereas Republicans’ attitudes towards the UN have held constant (at roughly 40 per cent approval).\textsuperscript{78} The 2020 Chicago Council survey found that just 32 per cent of Republicans and 9 per cent of Democrats thought that the United States should participate less in international institutions.\textsuperscript{79} When President Joe Biden reversed most of Trump’s efforts to pull back from those institutions, Pew polling showed that 52 per cent of voters had ‘mostly positive’ views of Biden’s decision, with just 17 per cent saying that they

\textsuperscript{76} Lindsey O’Rourke, Covert regime change (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018). For broader arguments that the United States frequently violates the liberal international order when it appears to be in its interest to do so, see Patrick Porter, The false promise of liberal order (Cambridge: Polity, 2020).
\textsuperscript{79} Smeltz et al., Divided we stand, pp. 20, 27.

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had ‘mostly negative’ views of that agenda. Thus, while US relations with international institutions are an area in which the grand strategy of deep engagement currently faces a clear threat from Donald Trump’s faction of the Republican Party, there is little indication that presidents who are committed to maintaining these relationships should be unable to do so.

Discussion and implications

This article has evaluated the widespread perception that the American political system has become too fractured to sustain a coherent grand strategy. This perception largely revolves around claims that Donald Trump abandoned traditional tenets of US foreign policy, along with fears that Democrats and Republicans can no longer agree on a common vision for global leadership. The article has explained that these claims largely focus on controversy surrounding expansive conceptions of liberal internationalism, and thereby overlook the degree of bipartisan consensus underpinning the grand strategy of deep engagement. Though President Trump explicitly rejected the idea of using US power as a tool for spreading liberal values, his foreign policy was largely consistent with the prescriptions of deep engagement. And when Trump departed from the principles of deep engagement, as in publicly questioning the US commitment to NATO, voters disapproved of his behaviour by large margins. Meanwhile, polling data show that bipartisan support for deep engagement has been rising, not falling, in recent years.

So far, the experience of the Biden administration has been consistent with the article’s argument. President Biden has not sought to cut US military capabilities; he has reaffirmed US security commitments in Europe and east Asia; he has not diminished the overall volume of US trade; and he has reversed many of Trump’s decisions to pull back from international institutions. The polling data reviewed in this article reveal that all of these choices have been consistent with voters’ policy preferences, and Biden has faced little overt pushback in these areas. The article also noted that voters have overwhelmingly backed Biden’s efforts to organize multilateral opposition to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. This bipartisan consensus shows that Americans are still willing and able to override party differences—and to bear substantial costs—in order to oppose interstate aggression. By contrast, Biden has encountered a sharply polarized electorate when dealing with foreign policy issues that fall outside the bounds of deep engagement, such as his handling of the war in Afghanistan, his efforts to stop global climate change and his attempt to renegotiate the Iran nuclear deal. The presence of bipartisan consensus behind some of Biden’s foreign policy decisions but not others reinforces the idea that presidents who wish to maximize the popularity of their

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80 iPoll: 3118318.00035.
international agendas have an incentive to keep those agendas focused on the core tenets of deep engagement.

Arguing that the grand strategy of deep engagement remains politically viable does not guarantee that the United States will follow it for the foreseeable future. If Donald Trump were re-elected for a second term, it is possible that he would mount a more aggressive challenge to the deep engagement’s principles. Some scholars believe that President Trump would have undermined deep engagement more thoroughly if he had not been constrained by foreign policy elites. Others argue that Trump simply lacked the capacity for sustained strategic thinking. These arguments suggest that a weakened bureaucracy or a different, anti-establishment president could plausibly dislodge deep engagement. Yet acknowledging these risk factors does not justify pronouncing deep engagement to be politically dead. Instead, the argument and evidence presented in this article suggest that a president who is committed to the principles of deep engagement would find a receptive audience among both Democrats and Republicans.

This article has not argued that President Trump did not damage the political foundations of deep engagement. Even if public opinion data show that Americans’ policy preferences did not shift against deep engagement during his presidency, Trump’s frequent criticisms of allies and international institutions—along with his broader anti-establishment rhetoric—may have undermined Americans’ basic faith in their country’s foreign policy. Thus, even if Democrats and Republicans continue to say that they support the principles of deep engagement, those preferences may be weaker than they were in the past. This is another reason for proponents of deep engagement to remain vigilant about potential threats to their preferred international agenda; but it still falls short of existing claims that the political foundations of American internationalism have collapsed.

This article has taken no normative position on whether deep engagement is the right grand strategy for the United States to pursue, and its argument does not suggest that presidents should abandon the principles of liberal internationalism. Americans currently appear to have a limited appetite for using their power to construct new forms of political cooperation or to promote global political change; President Trump was actively hostile towards liberal principles, and a future Republican president might well follow his lead in seeking to unravel policy commitments that liberal internationalists support. But this does not mean there

83 See e.g. Peter Dombrowski and Simon Reich, ‘Does Donald Trump have a grand strategy?’, International Affairs 95: 5, 2017, pp. 1031–37; Drezner, ‘Immature leadership’, pp. 383–400.
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are no viable opportunities for presidents who are committed to liberal internationalism to advance that grand strategy’s goals. 85

The argument and evidence presented here indicate that Americans’ foreign policy attitudes are more sophisticated than frequently portrayed. For instance, the data described in this article provide little indication that frustration with the so-called ‘forever wars’ has sapped Americans’ willingness to uphold the core principles of deep engagement. Fears that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan would catalyse isolationist sentiment thus appear to have underestimated voters’ ability to understand that the outcomes of those conflicts did not invalidate the justifications for America’s other foreign policy commitments.

Finally, the article shows that the literature on grand strategy provides useful tools for analysing the politics of US foreign policy. International Relations scholars frequently argue that scholarship on grand strategy is too abstract or impractical to inform foreign policy discourse. 86 Yet grand strategic frameworks help to anchor foreign policy debates by providing a menu of options for what America’s role in the world could entail. In particular, this article has explained that the grand strategy of deep engagement occupies a middle ground between ambitious visions of transforming global politics according to liberal internationalist principles and wholesale strategic retrenchment. Without directly evaluating the political foundations of deep engagement on their own terms, previous analyses of the politics of US grand strategy appear to have underestimated the degree to which American voters still support a coherent and reasonable approach to international affairs.

85 For guarded optimism on this front, see Chaudoin et al., ‘Down but not out’. For more pessimistic assessments, see Busby and Monten, ‘Has liberal internationalism been Trumped?’, Shapiro, ‘Liberal internationalism, public opinion, and partisan conflict’.