

SHADOW GOVERNMENT

# Trump's Grand Strategic Train Wreck

Believe it or not, the president has a grand strategy. But it's a nightmarish mess.

BY COLIN KAHL, HAL BRANDS

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## **Believe it or not, President Donald Trump has a grand strategy.**

According to some analysts, Trump's endless streams of erratic and apparently improvisational ideas don't add up to anything consistent or purposeful enough to call a grand strategy. We see it otherwise. Beneath all the rants, tweets, and noise there is actually a discernible pattern of thought — a Trumpian view of the world that goes back decades. Trump has put forward a clear vision to guide his administration's foreign policy — albeit a dark and highly troubling one, riddled with tensions and vexing dilemmas.

Grand strategy is the conceptual architecture that lends structure and form to foreign policy. A leader who is "doing grand strategy" is not handling global

events on an ad hoc or case-by-case basis. A grand strategy, rather, represents a more purposeful and deeply held set of concepts about a country's goals and orientation in international affairs.

At a minimum, a grand strategy consists of an understanding of the basic contours of the international environment, a country's highest interests and objectives within that environment, the most pressing threats to those interests, and the actions that a country can take in order to address threats and promote national security and well-being. Grand strategy, then, is both diagnostic and prescriptive. It combines an analysis of what is happening in the world and how it impacts one's country, with a more forward-looking concept of how a country might employ its various forms of power — hard or soft, military or economic — to sustain or improve its global position. Every grand strategy has a “what” dimension, a notion of what constitutes national security in the first place, and a “how” dimension, a theory of how to produce security in a dynamic international environment and given the tools at hand.

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## Threats and fears

(Photo credit:

SEAN

GALLUP/Getty Images) The fundamental grand strategic interest of the United

States today is precisely the same as it has been for the past

240 years: to ensure the country's physical security,

economic well-being, and way of life. The really interesting part of a

particular president's grand strategy, therefore, often begins with his or her

perception of the nature of the international environment and the main threats to these basic interests. For Trump, the principal threats to the United States stem primarily from what might be called “intermestic” challenges — that is, powerful external forces that reverberate directly into the American domestic arena, threatening homeland security, disrupting the U.S. economy, and contaminating our society.

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## In particular, three dangers dominate the new president's worldview.

In particular, three dangers dominate the new president's worldview. The first is the threat from “radical Islam” — which, for the president and many of his closest advisors, poses an existential and “civilizational” threat to the United States that must be “eradicated” from

the face of the Earth. Trump and his team see this threat as emanating not only from Sunni jihadist groups such as the Islamic State and al Qaeda, but from all Islamists. Michael Flynn, Trump's national security advisor, has described all forms of Islamism as a “cancer,” a “political ideology” that “hides behind being a religion,” and a “messianic mass movement of evil people.” (K.T. McFarland, the new deputy national security advisor, also appears to share these views.) The Trump worldview draws no distinctions between Sunni, Shiite, or other Islamic sects and traditions. Consequently, the description of the threat extends to Shiite Iran, which is a deeply problematic actor in the Middle East, but one that frequently finds itself at odds with radical Sunni jihadist groups such as the Islamic State. And, perhaps most troubling of all, the perceived threat also includes many devout Muslim-American citizens in the United States, who — in Trump's view — are a potential fifth column of homegrown Islamic extremists.

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practices of key competitors as grave threats to the U.S. economy and therefore a national security priority. In Trump's view, “disastrous trade deals” like NAFTA have gutted American manufacturing and depressed wages for millions of American workers. Trump has described the recently negotiated (but not ratified) Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP)

CLICK HERE along similar lines, labeling it a “rape of our country” on the  
 Sorry, Mr. campaign trail.  
 President:  
 The Obama Administration In Trump’s eyes, however, Enemy No. 1 in the economic  
 Did Nothing domain is China — which is not, contrary to what he often said  
 Similar to during the campaign, a party to the TPP. Just as Trump often  
 Your accused Japan of waging a campaign of economic predation  
 Immigration Ban against the United States in the 1980s, today Trump has gone  
 CLICK HERE so far as to declare that “we already have a trade war” with  
 It's Time for a New Kind of Resistance China — one that Beijing is winning. For years, Trump has  
 CLICK HERE accused China of devaluing its currency, dumping steel and  
 aluminum, stealing intellectual property, and exploiting other

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unfair trade practices vis-à-vis the United States, especially since China’s entry into the World Trade Organization in 2001. The purported goal of this Chinese campaign is to cripple American manufacturing and advance Beijing’s goal of economic and military dominance over the United States.

Trump has delivered warnings about China’s geopolitical behavior as well, including its militarization of the South China Sea and failure to do enough to rein in North Korea. But these issues are ultimately secondary to the dagger China has allegedly stuck into the heart of the U.S. economy. Trump’s pick for U.S. trade representative, Robert Lighthizer, has expressed a similar zero-sum view of the economic competition with China, as has Peter Navarro, the head of Trump’s newly created National Trade Council. And the view also extends to Trump’s top national security aides, Flynn and McFarland. Indeed, in White House meetings during the recent presidential transition period, a number of incoming Trump officials made it clear that the new administration viewed the economic war with China as perhaps the defining issue of the 21st century.

Third, and finally, Trump has consistently railed against illegal immigration, arguing that the pace and scale of migration has cost American jobs, lowered wages, and put unsustainable strains on housing, schools, tax bills, and general living conditions. He has also consistently framed immigration as an issue of personal and national security, arguing that illegal immigration is associated with crime, drugs, and terrorism — and claiming, without

providing supporting evidence, that “countless Americans” have died as a consequence. And, tying the issue back to his diagnosis of the terrorist threat, Trump has consistently portrayed Muslim refugees, immigrants, and the children of immigrants as a “Trojan horse” for the spread of radical Islam in the United States.

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### **The Trump doctrine**

(Photo credit:

DREW

ANGERER/Getty Images) To address these perceived threats, Trump has put forward

an “America First” grand strategy with four key pillars.

The first is what White House chief strategist Stephen Bannon proudly calls “economic nationalism.” Trump has signaled a willingness to embrace a protectionist and mercantilist foreign policy more familiar to the 19th and early 20th centuries than to the 21st. In his inaugural address, for example, Trump declared: “From this day forward, it’s going to be only America first, America first. Every decision on trade, on taxes, on immigration, on foreign affairs will be made to benefit American workers and American families. We must protect our borders from the ravages of other countries making our product, stealing our companies and destroying our jobs. Protection will lead to great prosperity and strength.”

To enact this vision, Trump, in one of his first executive actions as president, withdrew the United States from the TPP. He has also pledged to renegotiate

NAFTA, and to withdraw from that accord if Canada and Mexico do not meet his terms. He has threatened stepped-up trade enforcement actions and the imposition of tariffs as high as 45 percent against China and others engaged in unfair trade. And he says he will impose “consequences” on U.S. companies that move jobs overseas, perhaps by enacting heavy border duties on the importation of goods manufactured abroad. If you think that the foreign economic policies of the 1920s and 1930s worked well for the United States, then Trump’s economic statecraft is for you.

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A second key pillar is what might be called “extreme” homeland security. This includes the infamous wall along the U.S.-Mexico border and other investments in stepped-up border security. It includes Trump’s threat of mass deportations of illegal immigrants, starting with those with a criminal record. And his approach calls for an indefinite ban on Syrian refugees, a temporary ban on all refugees, and a suspension of legal immigration from several Muslim countries until such time as “extreme vetting” procedures can be put in place to ensure that entrants to the United States “share our values and love our people.” Last week, Trump signed an executive order putting all of these measures in motion. Trump has also expressed openness to a registry of all Muslims living in the United States, and threatened punitive action against those who fail to report friends or family members suspected of holding extremist views to law enforcement.

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What we call “amoral transactionalism” represents the third, and perhaps most central, feature of Trump’s grand strategy. In Trump’s view, the United States should be willing to cut deals with any actors that share American interests, regardless of how transactional that relationship is, and regardless of whether they share — or act in accordance with — American values. In the battle against radical

Islam, for example, Trump has said: “All actions should be oriented around this goal, and any country which shares this goal will be our ally.” The biggest

perceived opportunity, in this regard, is for a strategic realignment with Russia — a country Trump and some of his advisors see as a natural partner in the fight against Islamic extremists and perhaps in countering China too.

Trump's grand strategy is transactional in another sense as well. It contends that those allies and partners that gain from U.S. assistance should "pay up" — and, if they don't, that the United States ought to cut them loose. Since the 1980s, Trump has consistently characterized U.S. allies as wealthy freeloaders who disproportionately gain from American commitments and expenditures, to the detriment of U.S. security and the American economy. He has argued that NATO is obsolete and questioned the wisdom of the U.S. commitment to Japan and South Korea. For Trump, America's treaty alliances in Europe and Asia are not sacred commitments; U.S. allies are no better (or worse) than any other states, and, accordingly, our relationships with them should be conditional rather than special. As Trump argued in April: "The countries we are defending must pay for the cost of this defense, and if not, the U.S. must be prepared to let these countries defend themselves. We have no choice." Trump put it even more starkly in his inaugural address, arguing that the United States had "subsidized the armies of other countries while allowing for the very sad depletion of our military" — in essence, that America's alliances have made the country weaker and less secure.

The final pillar of Trump's grand strategy is a muscular but aloof militarism. For decades, Trump has advocated "extreme military strength." On the campaign trail and during the transition, Trump called for larger U.S. naval, air, and ground forces, and significant new investments in cyber warfare capabilities and nuclear weapons. (On Jan. 27, Trump announced an executive order to follow through on this commitment, but the details remain unclear.) Yet Trump's stated purpose is not to engage in military adventures, or to bolster U.S. alliances, but rather to deter potential adversaries and defeat those who attack the United States. Trump has pledged to intensify the military campaign against the Islamic State and other terrorist groups — but he has consistently criticized both regime change and nation building. In the campaign against the Islamic State, it is clear Trump hopes to depend heavily on local and regional "Muslim forces" to carry on the fight on the ground while the U.S. military's role is primarily to "bomb the shit out of them" —

and perhaps, if Trump is taken literally, to take Iraq's oil once the Islamic State is defeated. Past U.S. presidents wanted an America that was strong enough to shape global affairs; Trump seems to want an America that is strong enough to eradicate terrorism and then simply be left alone.

Taken together, Trump's "America First" grand strategy diverges significantly from — and intentionally subverts — the bipartisan consensus underpinning U.S. foreign policy since World War II. American presidents in the postwar era have generally seen a world of expanding democracy and free markets as safer and more prosperous. They have also believed that the modest investments the United States makes in protecting its allies and supporting international institutions are bargains, because they prevent adverse geopolitical developments that might ultimately require far higher costs — in both lives and money — to address.

Not so for Trump. He simply doesn't subscribe to the long-held belief that "American exceptionalism" and U.S. leadership are intertwined — that the influence of the United States on the world stage is rooted in the idea of America and the values it represents, not just its material power. Moreover, as Thomas Wright notes, "Trump believes that America gets a raw deal from the liberal international order" it helped construct seven decades ago and sustain to this day. He is therefore hostile to that order, institutionalized through alliances with other democratic states and international agreements that promote an open, rule-based international economy, and refuses to invest blood and treasure to maintain it.



## Trump's grand strategic dilemmas

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Images)

Trump's grand strategy is thus at odds with longstanding traditions in American foreign policy and poses an acute threat to the liberal international order that has

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underwritten U.S. security and prosperity for the past seven decades. Yet, even on its own terms, Trump's grand strategy is plagued by internal tensions and dilemmas that will make it difficult to achieve the president's stated objectives. There are many problems, but here we emphasize six.

First, it will be difficult for Trump to reconcile his policies toward Russia and Iran on the one hand with his desire to defeat the Islamic State on the other. Trump's apparent desire to go all-in with Russian President Vladimir Putin — and perhaps Syrian President Bashar al-Assad — to fight the Islamic State in Syria is likely to backfire. President Barack Obama conditioned the prospect of counterterrorism cooperation with Russia in Syria on Moscow enforcing a nationwide cease-fire and ensuring humanitarian access for the U.N. — conditions the Kremlin was ultimately unable or unwilling to meet. Moreover, during discussions with Moscow last fall, Obama insisted that the United States would have a veto over Russian targeting, that Assad's air force would be grounded over much of the country, and that the parties should return to the negotiating table to discuss a political transition. If Trump chooses to cooperate with Russia with no strings attached, it will make the United States complicit in Russia's indiscriminate bombing campaign and its efforts to prop up Assad. This is a recipe for fueling the civil war and jihadism, not combating it, and it is likely to alienate precisely the Sunni states Trump hopes to join his anti-Islamic State coalition on the ground.

Then there is the issue of Iran. In practice, backing Russia and Assad means aligning — whether openly or tacitly — with Iran, its surrogate Hezbollah, and Iranian-backed Shiite militias in Syria. This would effectively strengthen Iranian influence in Syria and the broader region — the very opposite of what Trump and his advisors desire. Consequently, if Trump means what he says about taking a harder line against Iran — both in the context of the nuclear deal and vis-à-vis Iran's destabilizing behavior across the Middle East — he

will have to try to convince Moscow to sever its partnership with Tehran and attempt to box Iran and Hezbollah out of Syria. That is easier said than done. Iran and Hezbollah's tentacles in Syria run deeper than Russia's, and they have a far greater stake in the outcome of that conflict than Moscow does. The Iranians are, therefore, likely to react to any overt effort to push them out by playing an active spoiler role that undermines the campaign against the Islamic State and, potentially, puts at risk U.S. special operations forces supporting counter-Islamic State opposition forces on the ground in Syria.

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A similar dilemma will face Trump in Iraq. The United States should work to balance and minimize Iranian influence in Iraq, in particular by encouraging the Baghdad government to work overtime to rein in Shiite popular mobilization forces (PMF). But an overtly hostile posture toward Iran (not to mention continued rants about taking Iraq's oil) would put Iraq's Shiite Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi in a jam, empowering his rivals who seek to distance Iraq from the United States. It could also incentivize Iran to unleash Shiite PMF to attack the approximately 5,000 American forces supporting the counter-Islamic State campaign in Iraq, something Iran has refrained from doing over the past two-and-a-half years. The result could be dramatically increased U.S. casualties and reduced American influence in Baghdad.

A second dilemma is that Trump's extreme measures to protect the homeland could further complicate the fight against the Islamic State. At home, Trump's expansive definition of radical Islam, his apparent belief that many American Muslims harbor secret sympathies for the Islamic State, and his threats to profile, register, and collectively punish entire communities, could poison ongoing efforts to forge better relations between American Muslims and law enforcement. Meanwhile, Trump's executive orders banning refugees and immigrants casts the United States as deeply Islamophobic, making it much less likely that Muslim-majority countries will step up their support for the U.S.-led fight against the Islamic State overseas. This will be doubly true if Trump follows through on other actions he has repeatedly pledged, including resuming torture, expanding Guantánamo, and moving the U.S. embassy in Israel to Jerusalem.

Third, Trump's approach to Europe and Russia — at least as he has outlined it so far — is equally self-defeating and contradictory. Trump's warm embrace of Putin; intimation that he will throw Ukraine (and potentially the Baltic states) under the Russian bus and lift Ukraine-related sanctions on Moscow; repeated trash-talking of NATO, the European Union, and committed Atlanticist leaders such as Germany's Angela Merkel; and celebration of Brexit and European populist movements will all drive a deep wedge between America and its most important democratic allies. These steps will also embolden Moscow's attempts to divide and coerce its European neighbors, and incentivize countries like Italy and Hungary, which are eager to get back to "business as usual" with Moscow and lift sanctions against Russia. Meanwhile, although Trump's threats to abandon U.S. allies might lead to greater European defense spending in the short term, it will radically undercut the organic solidarity and cohesion that make NATO so exceptional, and lead Washington's European partners to consider whether the United States is a dependable partner after all.

As problematic as these outcomes would be for European stability and security — the preservation of which has been a fundamental objective of U.S. policy since World War II — Trump might not find any of them particularly objectionable on their own. But what he appears not to understand is that weakening Europe will cut across his other policy objectives. Losing the support of U.S. allies will make it harder for Trump to cut "good" deals with Moscow: On issues from Ukraine to arms control to sanctions, the Kremlin will take advantage of every opportunity to play the United States and its estranged allies off one another. More broadly, the transatlantic alliance is the primary vehicle through which the United States tackles nearly every world problem, from the Islamic State to financial crises. Undercutting that alliance will therefore make for a more dangerous world, and more onerous American burdens of the sort Trump so often laments.

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**Trump is likely to have difficulty taking punitive action against China while also contending with**

Fourth, Trump is likely to have difficulty taking punitive action against China while also contending with the growing threat from North Korea. Pyongyang already has a fairly robust

## the growing threat from North Korea.

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nuclear arsenal, and according to news reports, it could field test its first nuclear-capable intercontinental ballistic missile in the coming months.

Two new U.N. Security Council resolutions passed last year imposed unprecedented sanctions on Pyongyang, including a strict limit on coal exports. These represent the best hope for a nonmilitary solution to the North Korean problem, but they will curb Pyongyang's programs only if China faithfully implements them, something Beijing regularly holds at risk depending on the tenor of the U.S.-China relationship. At times, Trump has suggested that he intends to use economic leverage to pressure China to play ball on North Korea. Most recently, in early January, Trump tweeted: "China has been taking out massive amounts of money & wealth from the U.S. in totally one-sided trade, but won't help with North Korea. Nice!"

Yet, consistent with Trump's view that the main axis of U.S.-China conflict is the zero-sum economic contest between Washington and Beijing, he seems more likely to try to use geopolitical leverage to change China's economic behavior. Trump has explained his threats to re-open the "One China policy," for example, as a negotiating tactic to force Chinese concessions on currency and trade. The net result is likely to be a policy that is so antagonistic toward China — an approach that puts Beijing's most important interests at risk, and actively seeks to harm China's economic prospects — that it cannot generate or sustain a working relationship to help address North Korea (or any other global challenge). Trump's tendency to diss and dismiss America's key Asian allies, Japan and South Korea, will further complicate his efforts to address the North Korea threat.

Fifth, in a bid to supposedly help American workers by withdrawing from the TPP (a pact creating a free-trade zone among a dozen countries representing 40 percent of global GDP), Trump is in fact helping China by ceding the economic battlefield in Asia to Beijing. He is also undermining America's geopolitical position in the world's most dynamic region. Seven of the 12 TPP countries (Australia, Brunei, Japan, Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore, and Vietnam), as well as eight other countries (Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Laos, Myanmar, the Philippines, South Korea, and Thailand) are already in

negotiations with Beijing on a Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership. This partnership would promote trade with China, and offer new opportunities for China to expand its political influence, without any of the requirements for economic liberalization or labor and environmental protections built into the TPP.

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Economists disagree about how much the TPP would or would not help the U.S. economy. But what is indisputable is that the Asia-Pacific region views the TPP as a bellwether of U.S. geopolitical commitment, and key states are likely to make decisions on non-economic issues like the South China Sea based on perceptions of retrenchment by the Trump administration. After all, if the United States is willing to abandon them on the TPP after many years of difficult negotiations, they may justifiably ask: What guarantee do they have that a Trump administration will actually show up when a major security threat emerges?

Finally, Trump's proposal to "build a wall" and somehow force Mexico to pay for it (perhaps through a 20 percent border tax), his threat to deport millions of illegal immigrants, and his pledge to renegotiate or even withdraw from the North American Free Trade Agreement, could create a train wreck in the U.S.-Mexico relationship — as evidenced by the abrupt cancellation of Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto's planned visit to Washington. A diplomatic crisis with Mexico would deeply complicate cooperation on a host of issues, including immigration, that are top priorities for Trump.

Since 2009, migration from Mexico itself has fallen dramatically. Nevertheless, Mexico has served as a "land bridge" for tens of thousands of migrants from other parts of Latin America seeking to make their way to the United States, especially those fleeing poverty, corruption, and crime in Central America. In recent years, Mexico has cooperated with the United States to address this challenge by improving security along the Mexico-Guatemala border and repatriating migrants back to their home countries before they reach the United States. The Obama administration also worked with the U.S. Congress to allocate nearly \$1.5 billion since 2014 to address the economic, governance, and violence-related drivers of Central American migration — and it will be essential to partner with Mexico on these efforts if

they are to succeed. Trump could put all this cooperation at risk with his shortsighted approach toward Mexico. And if actions on trade that contribute to a free fall in Mexico's economy compound Trump's approach, providing fresh incentives for Mexicans to once again move north, the migration crisis will worsen even further.

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### **No purpose without process**

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Every new president, of course, faces dilemmas to confront and strategic contradictions to resolve. But what is remarkable about Trump's "America First" grand strategy is the number, pervasiveness, and centrality of such contradictions. In other words: Trump has consistently articulated a set of basic grand strategic concepts, but the policy implications of those concepts add up to a Gordian knot of conflicting initiatives.

This raises the question of why Trump's grand strategy is so tangled and internally contradictory. And the answer has to do with the process — or rather, the lack thereof — through which these ideas are born, as well as, shall we say, the unique personality of the president himself.

It is hard to think of a presidential campaign, or a presidential transition, that has been more haphazard about translating ideas into a cohesive, practical, and implementable body of policies. Trump's campaign had virtually no

foreign-policy apparatus to speak of — many of his senior advisors had little foreign-policy experience and little contact with or influence on the candidate himself. The Trump team produced no meaningful white papers during the campaign — compared to those produced by Republican candidate Mitt Romney's team in 2012, for instance — that undertook the task of turning ideas into policy proposals and seeing how various themes might, or might not, fit together.

The transition was similarly shambolic and disorganized. Even nominees for top posts have apparently had few substantive conversations on issues such as Russia or alliances with Trump, although Rex Tillerson, the president's pick for secretary of state, has assured us that he has the president's phone number should the need for such a conversation arise. Moreover, the mechanics of transferring power from one presidential team to another — and thus the mechanics of actually starting to grapple with the real world challenges and contradictions of policy — were painfully slow to start moving. Add in a candidate (now president) whose core ideas are strongly held but often poorly considered, who likes bold proposals but disdains the nitty-gritty of turning them into workable courses of action, and for whom intellectual coherence does not seem to be a top priority, and you have a recipe for the grand strategic contradictions we see in Trump's approach.

What all this means, in practical terms, is that the implementation phase of Trump's grand strategy — the period in which the ideas upon which one campaigns are translated into the day-to-day initiatives by which one governs — is likely to be far messier than is normally the case. The Trump administration will have to determine how to proceed on those issues — such as Russia, Iran, alliance relations, trade, and homeland security — where key advisors have staked out positions very different from those of the president. More fundamentally, the Trump administration will have to determine how to reconcile the president's various promises and impulses — and where those things cannot be reconciled, how to prioritize among them.

This could be good news for the country and the world. As the Trump team realizes how intractable the contradictions are among the president's various policy pronouncements, it may see the wisdom in backing off of some of the

more problematic or dangerous ones. And the fact that there are so many profound disconnects between what Trump says and what is wise may create space for the president's more sober advisors — such as James Mattis, John Kelly, Rex Tillerson, and Nikki Haley — to shift policy and even influence the president's thinking. We can hope that this is the scenario that ultimately unfolds. But in the meantime, both the content and contradictions of Trump's grand strategy make it seem likely that U.S. foreign policy and the international order are in for a rough ride.

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*Correction, Feb. 2, 2017: John Kelly is the secretary of homeland security and described as one of the president's "more sober advisors." A previous version of this article misstated his first name.*

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Colin H. Kahl is an associate professor in the security studies program at Georgetown University's Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service. From 2014 to 2017, he was deputy assistant to President Barack Obama and national security advisor to Vice President Joe Biden. From 2009 to 2011, he served as the deputy assistant secretary of defense for the Middle East. In 2011, he was awarded the Secretary of Defense Medal for Outstanding Public Service by Secretary Robert Gates. He lives in Washington, D.C. with his wife and two children. Kahl is a co-editor of Shadow Government. (@ColinKahl)

Hal Brands is the Henry A. Kissinger distinguished professor of global affairs at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies. He is the author of several books, including *Making the Unipolar Moment: U.S. Foreign Policy and the Rise of the Post-Cold War Order* and *What Good Is Grand Strategy? Power and Purpose in American Statecraft From Harry S. Truman to George W. Bush*. He served as the special assistant to the secretary of defense for strategic planning from 2015 to 2016. (@HalBrandsI)

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