1. To inform its inquiry into the current capability review, the Joint Committee of the National Security Strategy requests comments on “the change in Administration in the United States”, which brings with it “a change to the wider international security environment.” In this submission, we challenge one widespread assumption. This assumption is that U.S. President Donald Trump is disengaging the United States from international affairs and security commitments.

1.1 Trump’s administration does pose problems, and does threaten to increase international disorder. It does so, however, not for the reasons observers often suggest. We argue that the United States’ reckless new president represents not a departure from American primacy, but an aggressive reassertion of it.\textsuperscript{1} The problem he poses is not abandonment. Rather, it is the problem of overstretch, as the superpower’s ambitions exceed its capabilities and as it gets caught in a debilitating cycle of war and debt. In this emerging environment, Britain is more likely to be embroiled than abandoned.

\textbf{Donald Trump and U.S. Grand Strategy}

2. Security experts fear that President Donald Trump will overturn America’s traditional grand strategy of “primacy”, often coined as “leadership.” Primacy has four interlocking parts: that America should be militarily overwhelmingly strong; that America should contain and reassure its allies in order to dampen their ambitions,

prevent a return to multipolarity and avoid spirals of alarm; that America should integrate other states into the institutions and markets it designs; and that America should inhibit nuclear proliferation, even at the risk of war.

2.1 Trump ran for office threatening to overturn tradition - the foreign, defence and economic policies of the United States - and the foreign policy establishment that guarded it. His slogan, “America First”, evoked interwar isolationism and zero-sum nationalism. Trump threatened to shred traditional alliances, accommodate major adversaries, tolerate nuclear proliferation, abandon the frequent use of military force (especially in open-ended nation-building wars) and exchange free trade for protectionism. In short, Trump would undermine the bipartisan and transatlantic consensus that America should lead the world, and convert the *Pax Americana* into a transactional protection racket.

2.2 Yet after one year in office, and with the recent release of three declaratory strategic documents (the *National Security Strategy*, the *Defense Strategy of the United States*, and the *Nuclear Posture Review*) there is enough evidence to suggest that President Donald Trump does not mark a discontinuity in the United States” fundamental security commitments. Trump’s demagogic, capricious and authoritarian style does raise allies’ doubts and may have a significant impact upon the policymaking process in Washington DC. An overview of his administration’s decisions, however, demonstrates that existing U.S. strategy persists, and that the habitual ideas that underpin it are hard to change. Trump’s America exercises military preponderance in key regions, maintains and reinforces alliances, and pursues counterproliferation, even at the risk of war, in order to forestall the emergence of challengers and prevent a return to multipolar disorder.

2.3 Within only months of his presidency, Trump altered both the rhetoric and substance of his stance toward allies. By April 2017, NATO was “no longer obsolete.” In May, Trump increased the United States’” European Reassurance Initiative by 40 per cent, established by President Obama to signal U.S. commitment with increased troops, infrastructure and exercises after Russia’s
annexation of Crimea in 2014. Trump signalled support for NATO while insisting its members contribute more, in his address in Brussels in May 2017 and in Warsaw in July. In June, he reaffirmed the U.S. commitment to Article 5 of the NATO Charter. Trump at the urging of advisers now took only a more abrasive version of the position taken by every president since Eisenhower, that NATO is vital, but that member states should contribute more. In the Middle East, Trump embraced Saudi Arabia and the Gulf monarchies in the United States’ traditional role as armorer and protector, in his May visit to Riyadh signing a $110 billion arms deal and jettisoning “America First” rhetoric in favour of “bipartisan internationalism.” Under Trump, U.S. airstrikes in Yemen have increased six-fold.

2.4 Within six months of taking office, Trump’s strategic vision for the world’s key power centres – the Gulf, Europe and East Asia- held America to be the principal security provider. In Asia, Secretary for Defence James Mattis reassured Japan and South Korea of U.S. alliance commitments. Towards Russia, Trump did not lift sanctions imposed to penalise Moscow’s adventurism in the Ukraine. He authorised the sale of “defensive” weapons to the Ukraine against Russia-leaning separatists, sold Patriot missiles to Poland and demanded that Russia withdraw from the Crimea. Trump’s National Security Strategy of December 2017 promised continued primacy, dominance in key regions, and counter-proliferation, while more explicitly acknowledging competition with rivals. In July 2017, Trump approved plans to increase U.S. freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea, to resist Chinese expansion.

2.5 Trump has also rededicated the United States to military preponderance and the frequent use of force that is a hallmark of U.S. unipolarity. Campaigning for office, Trump denounced his opponent’s hawkishness. He promised to reduce and focus the use of force, to “stop racing to topple foreign regimes that we know nothing about, that we shouldn’t be involved with,” to withdraw from Afghanistan, to avoid nation-building expeditions, and to focus on the Islamic State and counterterrorism.
3. Since taking office, Trump showed a propensity toward using force. By July 31, 2017, Trump had overseen the unleashing of 80% of the bombs dropped by the U.S. under Obama during the whole of 2016, including the most bombs dropped on Afghanistan since 2012. Trump also increased the U.S. ground commitment to Afghanistan. In the name of deterring the use of chemical weapons, Trump bombed President Bashar al-Assad’s regime in Syria. In Syria, the Trump administration has left an open-ended military presence that it explicitly directs against Iran, planting a security footprint of indefinite duration. Trump has overseen an historic increase in the defense budget, and his Nuclear Posture Review declares an ambition for nuclear supremacy, an expansion of the conditions in which it threatens nuclear use, and an increased arsenal of low-yield, more “useable” nuclear bombs.

4. Trump has also conformed with the tradition of nuclear “inhibition,” forcefully confronting North Korea over its nuclear and missile programs. While campaigning for office, he suggested he would tolerate nuclear proliferation by South Korea, Japan and Saudi Arabia. He imagined negotiating with the “rogue” proliferator, North Korea’s ruler Kim Jong Un, suggesting that nuclear proliferation was both inevitable and acceptable. These sentiments violated decades of tradition, whereby the United States has inhibited proliferation through security guarantees, troop deployments, arms sales, nuclear umbrellas and sanctions. But by the summer of 2017, Trump was engaged in brinkmanship with North Korea, attempting to coerce Pyongyang to abandon its nuclear ambitions, with threats of preventive war.

5. A historical perspective suggests that the Trump’s coercive treatment of allies is less of a break with the past than often thought. In reality, the United States has often coerced allies with threats of abandonment and punishment. Indeed, the possibility that the United States might withdraw is part of its diplomatic arsenal. In 1954, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles threatened Europe with an “agonising reappraisal” of alliances. In 1973-4, President Richard Nixon and his National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger suspended intelligence and nuclear cooperation to punish British non-cooperation over a US-initiated Declaration of Principles and the privacy of bilateral and UK-EEC discussions. The United States has used the threat of abandonment to persuade allies and clients to cancel their nuclear programmes, including West Germany, Japan and Taiwan. The demand that European allies
shoulder more of the burden of military expenditure is a staple of U.S. diplomacy, from President Dwight Eisenhower to former Secretary of State Robert Gates. Despite Britain spending blood and treasure in Afghanistan and Iraq to support the War on Terror and cement its standing in Washington, President Barack Obama made a blunt threat that departing the EU would place the UK at the “back of the queue” when seeking a bilateral free trade agreement. Trump coerces allies with a different style and temperature, but with essentially the same substance.

6. Trump’s earlier behaviour towards allies - his threats of abandonment, criticism of ‘delinquent’ allies and transactional views of what alliances are for – has admittedly raised doubts in some quarters about the credibility of U.S. alliance guarantees. This is more true of Western and Northern Europe than Eastern Europe however, where the Trump administration has doubled down on its strategic commitments and appointed orthodox, hawkish pro-NATO traditionalists signalled a general political alignment with the conservative nationalist politics of countries like Poland.²

7. Foreign policy in the United States is made not by one leader, but by an elite security class. To overhaul U.S. grand strategy would require a determined revisionist leader, backed by an equally determined and revisionist class, willing to take the political costs of introducing major change. Trump demonstrably does not have the appetite or cost-tolerance to be that agent of change, and his main advisors are traditionalist establishment figures who on most grand strategic questions have quickly brought him into line.

Defining the Problem

8. What, then, is the nature of the problem that Trump poses? The totality of Trump’s decisions will widen the dangerous between America’s power and commitments. All at once, Trump has multiplied America’s security commitments, undertaken a major military build-up with an increased defence budget, and significantly reduced taxes on corporations and high income earners. These tendencies – of overreach and strategic insolvency - were already implicit in America’s position before Trump took office.

Trump has accelerated and magnified them. The results are likely to include a number of self-inflicted wounds: a “boom bust” economic cycle, an increased and unsustainable debt load, a spiralling crisis over the Korean peninsula with a nucleararmed adversary, continued hostilities and competition between Russia and NATO in Eastern Europe, including a further erosion of deterrence stability, and escalating rivalries with China and Iran. In other words, the difficulty is not that the United States is disengaging from the world, but that in the process of overstretch and decline, it will unintentionally create further chaos abroad and divisions at home.

8.1 In one important respect, Trump’s National Security Strategy does mark a departure. An important structural shift is taking place in international politics, namely the return of competitive multipolarity and great power confrontation. This shift began well before Trump, but it is now intensifying. Instead of promising a harmony of interests between the United States and the rest of the world, Trump’s document are explicitly competitive. This departure reflects not just the pen of the authors, but material change in the outside world. There was a lag between these developments and the outlook of previous National Security Strategy visions. But were we now living under a Clinton presidency, we may have also seen in the National Security Strategy a franker acknowledgement that China and Russia are now open competitors. The cumulative pattern of subversion and resistance after a certain point cannot be wished away as temporary blips on the path to ultimate submission to a “liberal world order”: annexing the Crimea and intrusion into the Ukraine, seizing territories in the South China Sea, aggressive trade practices, or intensifying cyber and propaganda mischief.

8.2 American primacists long hoped that Washington’s main potential geopolitical rivals would submit themselves to Washington’s aegis even as they got richer under the globalisation that Washington itself stewarded.

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For years, Washington could maintain an optimism that the main threat was transnational jihadism, and the main project was to transform the Middle East. That hope is dead, or at least dying. Thus, Trump’s *National Security Strategy* is symptomatic of the changing structure of world politics. It is not that Trump has abandoned primacy. But he faces its growing perils. For the first time since the fall of the Soviet Union and the coming of unipolarity, America in its written strategy acknowledges that its primacy (at least in Asia) now confronts serious challenge by contenders who will not be reconciled to U.S. hegemony.

8.3 If Britain can exercise any influence through its relationship with Washington, the challenge will not be “keeping America engaged”, but in helping to define the terms of engagement, keeping escalating rivalries within limits, and negotiating a stable, multipolar world order.

**Implications for the UK National Security Strategy**

9. While these are large questions of alliance politics and international structure, they bear directly on the capability discussions currently at the centre of UK defence debate – specifically, the affordability or otherwise of the “Joint Force 2025” outlined in the 2015 NSS/SDSR. Our research demonstrates that Trump’s United States is not undertaking the “retreat from the world” that many fear, but also that a world of Western relative decline, US overseas entanglements, and multipolar great-power competition will nonetheless carry dangers for Britain. Detailed discussion of specific UK capability sets, optimal levels of MOD resourcing, the particular influence of Brexit on aspects of the Defence Equipment Programme, and so forth, lies beyond the scope of this submission. But we offer three central points of warning on UK capabilities that arise from our wider argument.
9.1 First, a multipolar world of hostile major powers opposed to Britain and our NATO allies will necessitate the heavy, high-end warfighting capabilities necessary to deter conflicts with similarly capable peer-competitor states – and to survive in such conflicts, if deterrence fails. The future of UK security policy is not all about counter-terrorism, weak-state stabilisation, and “asymmetry”. Indeed, claims that “hybrid operations” in Eastern Europe represent some radical new departure elide (a) just how much heavy capability such operations involve, (b) the centrality of subversion/disinformation to strategy throughout history, and (c) the risk of escalation to conventional/nuclear warfighting that represents “hybrid” warfare’s greatest danger.

9.2 Second, if Britain again gets sucked into costly US-led overseas military entanglements – as it was in Iraq and Afghanistan – that will be detrimental to UK capabilities, specifically to the “balanced” defence necessary to face a future of both state- and non-state threats. Insofar as Britain has allowed its military to become a counterinsurgency and counter-terrorism-centric force over the past fifteen years, to the detriment of such domains as anti-submarine warfare, air defence, and combined-arms manoeuvre warfare at scale – imbalances that we are now struggling to redress on a tight budget – this owes predominantly to “bandwagoning” with US strategy. So if Trump’s America gets itself into similar future scrapes, this will present London with agonising choices: over whether to align with NATO’s principal security guarantor, at great cost, or whether to break with Washington, risking US censure/coercion/abandonment. And it will also knock-on to the UK capabilities currently being haggled over in Whitehall.

9.3 Finally, a world of resurgent major-power competition, debt-funded US overseas military entanglements, and waning American ability to shoulder all of its allies’ security burdens simultaneously will not be a world conducive to further cuts in British capability. So whatever the eventual Treasury/MOD resource settlement reached in the current
National Security Capability Review and its “Modernising Defence Programme”, further reductions in independent UK forces – already eviscerated by the 2010 SDSR, and the Iraq/Afghan eras before that – will come with grievous risks to national security.