The transnationalist US foreign-policy elite in exile?
A comparative network analysis of the
Trump administration

NANA DE GRAAFF AND BASTIAAN VAN APELDOORN

VU University, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
n.a.de.graaff@vu.nl (corresponding author)
e.b.van.apeldoorn@vu.nl

Abstract  The presidency of Donald Trump – often framed as a result of a populist revolt against the elites of Washington and Wall Street – and his apparent break with the postwar liberal internationalist foreign-policy elite consensus, has raised fundamental questions about the future of elite power in the USA and the implications for its global role. As established by previous research, America’s foreign-policy elite has in the past decades been closely connected to transnationally oriented corporate elite networks, the theme of this special issue. In this article, we address to what extent the Trump presidency represents a real rupture with these extant power structures in the American political system and its foreign-policy establishment. We present the first systematic mapping and social network analysis of Trump, his cabinet and his White House advisers, which, based on a novel biographical data set, compares earlier findings on the elite networks of the Clinton, Bush and Obama administrations. While finding some strong continuities, the Trumpian foreign-policy elite is shown to display some very distinctive characteristics, particularly with respect to a lack of previous political affiliations, ties with a different kind of corporate elite, and a disconnect with the policy-planning networks that have been so central to the previous administrations.

Keywords  CORPORATE ELITE NETWORKS, FOREIGN POLICY, POPULISM, TRANSNATIONAL ELITES, TRUMP ADMINISTRATION, USA

Donald Trump’s assumption of power is often portrayed as a populist revolt against established elites, whether national or transnational. Riding the wave of a populist backlash against globalization and what Trump himself identified as a growing popular rejection of elitist globalism associated with Wall Street banks and vested interests, his unexpected election came with a promise to drain the Washington ‘swamp’. Countering this image of an anti-elitist, populist president, Trump has instead stuffed his cabinet and team of advisers with fellow billionaires and millionaires – an early estimate of the

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Global Networks 21, 2 (2021) 238–264. ISSN 1470-2266.

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combined wealth of Trump’s cabinet was US$ 14 billion (Picchi 2016) – leading some to identify his administration as ‘pluto-populist’ (Wolf 2017). Clearly, the administration is in that sense still close to the interests of the so called ‘1 per cent’, as also testified by Trump’s 2017 tax cut, which disproportionally benefits the ultra-rich. At the same time, it is often argued that the Trump administration signals a break with the ‘globalist’ foreign-policy consensus – arguably serving the interest of the same 1 per cent – that has reigned in Washington for more than seven decades (Jervis et al. 2018). When it comes to the question of elite power, these conflicting images of the Trump presidency call for a closer investigation of the nature of the elite networks of Trump’s team of policy makers and advisers. In this article, we shall do so by focusing on foreign-policy elites and assessing to what extent Trump signals a break with established elite networks.

Regularly referred to in the media, but little researched and largely ignored by theories of international relations and foreign-policy analysis, American foreign policy has long been planned for and made by a foreign-policy establishment (Layne 2017), firmly rooted in national and transnational elite networks. These elite networks, as our previous research (which involved extensive social network analysis of the elite connections of the foreign-policy makers of the Clinton, Bush and Obama administrations) has shown, are characterized first of all by close ties to transnationally oriented capital (van Apeldoorn and de Graaff 2014, 2016). This transpired because two-thirds of the foreign-policy makers had prior top-level corporate affiliations, of which a relatively high percentage were with Fortune 500 corporations, large banks, consultancy firms and other financial institutions. A second key finding in our previous research was the centrality of transnationally oriented think tanks and policy-planning institutes, such as the Council on Foreign Relations, the Brookings Institution, and the Trilateral Commission, among the elite networks of America’s post-cold war foreign-policy makers. These organizations, in turn, often appeared to be funded by large US transnational corporations (TNCs) and directed by members of America’s corporate elite (van Apeldoorn and de Graaff 2014, 2016).

America’s foreign-policy elite has, at least in recent decades, been closely connected with some of the transnational policy elite networks analysed elsewhere in this special issue. In this sense, we can speak of a transnationalist foreign-policy elite that is both nationally anchored and transnationally oriented. The question is to what extent this is still the case after Donald Trump’s election. It is clear that, for many in the foreign-policy establishment, his election came as a real shock and, given that it was seen as shaking the very foundations of the US-led liberal world order to which America’s transnational foreign-policy elite had always been so committed, it caused considerable anxiety (Jervis et al. 2018; Walt 2018). Nonetheless, given the staying power of this elite, others have suggested that it is quite plausible that Trump, like other presidents before him, will ultimately have to make his peace with the foreign-policy establishment (Walt 2018).

Trump’s professed embrace of an ‘America first’ policy, certainly in rhetoric but also in substantive policies such as the withdrawal of the Paris climate change agreement, the Trans-Pacific Partnership free trade agreement, and the trade war with
China, appears to imply a radical break with the kind of liberal American globalism that has been at the heart of its foreign policy since at least the Second World War (Layne 2006; van Apeldoorn and de Graaff 2016: Chapter 2). In previous work, we identified this as an ‘open-door grand strategy’ (LaFeber 1998; Williams 2009) intended primarily to open up borders and markets globally and tear down barriers to trade and investment with a view to promoting the liberal expansionism that has continued throughout the post-cold war era (van Apeldoorn and de Graaff 2012, 2014). With his emphasis on protecting American workers and industry – and indeed at the time of writing on an escalating trade war with China on the basis of a neo-mercantilist interpretation of America’s global economic interests – as well as a rhetoric opposed to globalism and in favour of building tariffs and concrete walls, Trump’s outlook on the world appears to be the exact opposite of ‘open-door’ globalism. At the same time, notwithstanding the rhetoric, the USA is not retreating into isolationism under Trump and, according to some in the foreign-policy establishment, is pursuing a rather conventional foreign policy (Abrams 2017). In fact, some longstanding neoconservative, hawkish advocates of ‘democracy promotion’ and interventionism, such as national security adviser John Bolton and the recent special envoy to Venezuela Elliott Abrams, have returned to the White House (Wertheim 2019).

After several years in power, the Trump presidency still sends out mixed and often difficult to decipher signals (Dombrovski and Reich 2017), but what is quite clear is that it is no longer business as usual. While we neither assess the Trump administration’s erratic and inconsistent foreign-policy record, nor attempt to predict its further evolution, we argue that a critical starting point in evaluating the extent to which the Trump presidency radically breaks with established patterns is to examine its foreign-policy makers, their affiliations and the (elite) networks in which they are embedded.

We aim to identify the networks of the foreign-policy makers within Trump’s team and gauge exactly how they differ from other extant elite power structures and elite policy networks. We therefore focus on the personal and professional networks and (corporate) elite backgrounds of the Trumpian foreign-policy elite to assess to what extent longstanding elite power structures in the USA have been effectively challenged, and if so, what alternative elite networks and (corporate/social) backgrounds Trump and his inner circle of advisers and officials represent. Are we witnessing the emergence of a distinctively different foreign-policy elite? Is this elite still strongly networked with a corporate elite and, if so, is it the same transnationally oriented corporate elite or a rather different kind? To what extent does this network connect to the think tanks and other policy planning bodies that have been so prominent in the past? In other words, how do these patterns differ from those of the three post-cold war administrations of Clinton, Bush and Obama?

We answer these questions by examining select cabinet and White House officials at the start of Trump’s presidency, then compare our findings with our earlier ones on the three previous administrations (van Apeldoorn and de Graaff 2016). While an analysis of Trump’s foreign policy falls outside the scope of this article, we suggest that an analysis of the elite networks and their key properties will give important clues on the future direction of and current contradictions in America’s foreign policy. Since
people make foreign policy, agency matters, but it is the social context in which this agency is located that shapes the ideas, interests and worldviews of these foreign-policy actors. It is thus important to establish who they are, what their background is, and to what social networks they belong.

After positioning our analysis within the literature on (US) elite power structures and outlining our theoretical and analytical approach, we describe our methodology and data collection. We then present our empirical findings on Trumpian foreign-policy elite networks, particularly on their political, corporate and policy planning aspects, before interpreting the rather different kind of elite that Trump and his inner circle represent (Useem 1984). We conclude by reflecting on the implications of our findings for American foreign policy making under Trump, predicting the future global role of the USA, and formulating a research agenda to further this line of analysis.

**Power structure research and US foreign-policy makers**

Since publication of the sociologist C. Wright Mills’s (1956) seminal work on *The power elite* – an elite situated at the apex of American society and controlling large corporations, the military and the state – a rich body of research has developed to document the properties, continuities and changes within these elite power structures and networks (Domhoff 1967, 2009; Dye 1986, 2014; Mintz 2002; Schwartz 1987). As these studies reveal, central components of the American power elite are the corporate community, namely chief executives and directors of large (multinational) corporations, who are themselves often embedded in extensive networks of interlocking directorates, the people governing important think tanks, as well as the owners of corporate wealth. Indeed, a key property of the American ‘ruling elite’ and, arguably, a crucial link between the corporate community and the policy making elite, is what Domhoff (1967, 2007, 2009) referred to as the *policy planning network* – an often dense conglomeration of think tanks, research institutes, foundations and (business) advocacy groups that seek to set the political agenda, develop and propagate key ideas, shape public and elite opinion, and thus plan and shape policy making in the United States (Burris 2005, 2008).

Another relevant body of literature is in the field of international political economy, which offers a more explicitly historical materialist interpretation – a class, rather than a (power) elite perspective. It particularly emphasizes the processes of transnational class formation, with a transnational capitalist class lending an organic unity to ‘the West’. Van der Pijl’s (1984) book on *The making of the Atlantic ruling class* and Gill’s (1990) work on the Trilateral Commission as a key transnational private planning body in the context of globalizing capitalism, link the analysis of transnational power structures to an understanding of American global power, as does Robinson’s (2004) work, though from a somewhat different theoretical angle. A more recent related line of research, but one that does not specifically focus on either the USA or on how power structures relate to (foreign) policy outcomes, maps and analyses transnational corporate class and elite networks through the lens of interlocking directors, at transatlantic, European and global levels (Cárdenas 2015; Carroll 2010; de Graaff
Although the heyday of these elite studies and class analyses of American power structures lasted from the 1960s to the 1980s, there has been a recent revival in the field. Apart from studies on transnational corporate interlocks and transnational policy elites (Seabrooke and Tsingou 2009), the more recent revival includes work that focuses specifically on the American corporate power elite in relation to US foreign policy (Parmar et al. 2017). Parmar’s Gramscian-inspired research yields empirically rich case studies of the ideological properties and corporate elite bases of the Ford, Rockefeller and Carnegie Foundations (Parmar 2012), and of the Council on Foreign Relations (Parmar 2004). He shows how these organizations, whose leaders are closely tied to American corporate capital, which in turn shapes their worldview, have played a significant role in the formation of America’s globalist foreign policy.

Our work employing biographical mapping and social network analysis, as discussed at the beginning of this article, provides a systematic empirical analysis of the close and continual connection of post-cold war US foreign-policy makers with the corporate community (de Graaff and van Apeldoorn 2011; van Apeldoorn and de Graaff 2014, 2016). We subsequently showed how these elite structures conditioned the formation of America’s overall foreign-policy strategy, or ‘grand strategy’.3 The obvious question to arise from the Trump presidency is whether there has been a rupture between the elite networks that formulate foreign-policy strategy and the old established elite structures. If so, it is bound to have implications for the foreign-policy strategy. Before providing such a mapping and interpreting some of its implications, we shall specify our method and data.

Mapping foreign-policy elite networks: method and data

To map the networks of Trump’s foreign-policy elite, we collected biographical data on 30 of his key cabinet-ranking officials and of his senior advisers involved in foreign-policy making at the highest level. We interpret foreign policy broadly to cover all policies – including, crucially, foreign economic policy – through which the United States exercises its global power and have selected the key cabinet members accordingly. To ensure compatibility with our earlier analysis, we selected the following officials: the president and the vice president; the secretaries and deputy secretaries of state, defence and the treasury; the attorney general; the secretary of commerce; the US trade representative; the chief of staff of the White House; the (two) senior advisers to the president; the national security adviser; the director of the CIA; the director of the National Economic Council; the ambassador to the UN; the director of the Office of Management and Budget; and the chair of the Council of Economic Advisers. In addition to these 19 structural positions, which we keep constant across the different administrations,4 we selected ten additional policy makers in varying key positions, including the secretary of homeland security John Kelly; the president’s adviser Ivanka Trump; counsellor Kellyanne Conway, and trade tsar Peter Navarro. The reason for this
is that within each administration there may be particular positions, often even created for the occasion, prompted by the changing global political and economic context and the perceived required foreign-policy responses, or dictated by the personal preferences of the president in question.

In line with our earlier analyses, we chose the starting date of the incoming administration, in this case January 2017, as our selection date. While fluctuations in personnel are common in the United States, even within the period of one administration, the Trump one has been notorious for its extremely high turnover of top appointments in both the cabinet and among the staff of advisers. As a result, more than a quarter of our original selection (namely eight officials and advisers) have now left the administration and five have been moved to other positions. Despite this limitation, we base our analysis on the original selection both to ensure compatibility with the data we have on the previous administrations and because such fluctuations can be expected to continue, which would make any cut-off point arbitrary. Although we only provide a snapshot, we believe that it is one that is representative of patterns of elite affiliation. In addition, while some officials, such as national security adviser Michael Flynn who had to leave after a few weeks, obviously have been unable to leave their mark on Trump’s foreign policies, others who have departed – such as Steve Bannon, Trump’s chief strategist, who resigned after eight months – obviously have.

As a distinctive methodological approach (cf. the introduction to this special issue), we employ what we call biographical mapping, combined with social network analysis and complementary qualitative analysis. For each of the individuals selected, we applied extensive biographical mapping. In the present analysis, which to ensure systematic comparison we have kept in line with our earlier work, we focus on three types of affiliations – corporate, policy planning and state. For the corporate affiliations, we include all formal top-level positions held in a company before taking up a post in the administration; this covers executive, (founding) owner/partner, non-executive board, and advisory board positions. For policy planning affiliations, we include all types of formal membership, for instance director, trustee or fellow. For state affiliations, we focus on previous positions held at the federal state level, from level IV upward in the so-called US Executive Schedule.

The data are collected from a plethora of different online sources, including US government websites; disclosure reports of the Office of Government Ethics; websites pertaining to the individuals’ affiliations (including company, university and think tank ones); annual reports of affiliated companies and policy planning bodies; Forbes; Businessweek; Who’s Who; newspaper archives via Lexis Nexis; and books via Google Books. In presenting our analyses and findings below, we sometimes combine the data selected on Trump’s team with those collected earlier on the post-cold war administrations of Clinton (1997), Bush (2001) and Obama (2010). For more information on the latter, see van Apeldoorn and de Graaff (2016: Chapter 3).

On the basis of our collected data we employ social network analysis (SNA) to visualize and analyse the networks (Scott 1991; Scott and Carrington 2011; Wasserman and Faust 1994). More specifically, to construct so-called two-mode networks, we map the combined ego networks of our selected individuals. Two-mode networks map both
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the actors and the organizations to which they are affiliated, and thus contain a duality of persons and groups (Domhoff 2009: 6) – interpersonal relations through common organizational affiliations and inter-organizational relations through the person’s memberships. As software programs, we use UCINET and NETDRAW (Borgatti et al. 2002). We employ SNA in its most basic form, namely as a mapping devise, for which it remains a powerful method of visualizing and systematically presenting social structures that otherwise remain invisible – in this case, structures of elite power.

We now turn to the analysis of the elite networks of the Trump administration and present our key findings. We start by comparing the previous federal state affiliations of Trump’s key cabinet members with those of his predecessors.

Analysis of the Trumpian foreign-policy elite networks

Political networks

In Table 1, we compare the number of federal state positions held by our selected foreign-policy makers before their appointments in the Trump administration with those of the Republican Bush (2001) and the Democratic Clinton (1993) and Obama (2009) administrations respectively. It reveals that only two out of the 30 selected top foreign-policy makers of the Trump administration held previous positions at federal state level. This is extremely low, particularly when compared with 17 with such experience in the Obama administration, and 22 in the Bush administration.

Table 1: Overview of state affiliations of top foreign-policy makers Clinton (1993), Bush (2001), Obama (2009), Trump (2017)

| Administration | Foreign policy makers without previous positions | Foreign policy makers with previous positions |
|----------------|-----------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|
| Clinton        | 18                                            | 12                                          |
| Bush           | 7                                             | 22                                          |
| Obama          | 13                                            | 17                                          |
| Trump          | 27                                            | 2                                           |

Source: own data collection.

Figures 1a, 1b and 1c depict the networks of the previous state affiliations of the foreign-policy makers in the last three administrations. This two-mode form of mapping shows to which previous administrations the individuals were affiliated. In the case of Bush, the graph reveals a significant overlap of his team with that of his father’s (H. W. Bush), as well as with the Reagan administration; a total of 13 and 11 foreign-policy makers respectively. In terms of appointments between the Obama and Clinton administrations, we also find remarkable continuity, with almost half (14) of the former’s 30 selected foreign-policy makers having held positions in the Clinton administration. In the case of Trump, we find hardly any continuity in this regard.
Most (28 in total) of Trump’s originally appointed top foreign-policy makers have no previous affiliations at all at the federal state level. Only two had such previous affiliations. Lighthizer, Trump’s US trade representative, served as deputy trade representative in the Reagan administration, after which he, in a classic revolving door
pattern, returned to corporate law practice, leading an international trade group in Skadden,

Figure 1c: Career paths in federal administration foreign-policy makers Trump (2017)

Source: own data collection.

which Forbes Magazine referred to as ‘Wall Street’s most powerful law firm’ (Fisher 2009). The other is deputy secretary of state Sullivan, a corporate lawyer who had worked as general counsel and deputy secretary of commerce in the Department of Commerce under George W. Bush. Although some of the more recent replacements in the Trump administration have previous state affiliations – such as John Bolton, who was one of G. W. Bush’s hawkish inner circle advisers and his ambassador to the UN (and served in both the H. W. Bush and the Reagan administrations) – the majority of his team have no such elite foreign-policy profiles. As the comparison shows, this is a clear break with earlier administrations, both Republican and Democrat.

This confirms the popular perception that Trump’s foreign-policy team consists of many outsiders – Trump himself is of course the ultimate outsider – and that it is much less embedded than the others in the US foreign-policy establishment (Shear 2016). Here, it is necessary to add that while several were and are genuine outsiders to federal politics (such as Trump’s former number one ‘policy whisperer’ Bannon, the treasury secretary Mnuchin, and former secretary of state Tillerson), others certainly qualify as Republican and Washington insiders. Examples of the latter are former chief of staff Reince Priebus, who was fired in the summer of 2017 but who had previously chaired the Republican National Committee, and the former senator Jeff Sessions, who was Trump’s attorney general until just after the mid-term elections of November 2018. Nevertheless, from the perspective of US foreign-policy making, it matters that so few in Trump’s team have prior federal government experience.

It is now obvious that Trump’s track record in making appointments has been peculiar in many respects. Aside from the characteristics described above, which
clearly distinguish his selections and appointments of personnel from those of his predecessors, as well as the exceptionally high and at times chaotic and unpredictable turnover of top appointments, Trump has been notoriously slow to appoint personnel to the lower levels of the administration (Partnership for Public Service 2017). The extreme fluctuation in top appointments has arguably created instability in the administration’s foreign-policy making, adding to the president’s incoherent leadership style. The historically slow pace of appointments at lower levels of the bureaucracy compared with his post-cold war predecessors (Partnership for Public Service 2017), has probably exacerbated the lack of continuity, know-how and experience within the US foreign-policy apparatus.

Now that we have a sense of the previous and current affiliations of Trump’s original team, and of how it manifests a break with the past in terms of inexperience and detachment from the US foreign-policy establishment, let us now turn to the corporate elite networks. To what extent did Trump ‘drain the swamp’ here? Did he break with the Wall Street elite against which he fulminated during his campaign?

**Corporate networks**

Our findings in Table 2 show that a high number of top foreign-policy makers in post-cold war administrations had held senior corporate affiliations before entering office, as executives, directors, founders, owners, senior advisers, or partners in a law firm. In this regard, Trump’s team is no exception. In fact, his administration outnumbers the others with 24 of the 30 top foreign-policy makers (which is more than 80 per cent) having a previous corporate affiliation. With a total of 117 senior positions in corporations (the number between parentheses in Table 2), of the four post-cold war US administrations, the Trump team is in fact the most extensively connected to the corporate world.

**Table 2: Overview of corporate linkers and corporate affiliations per administration**

|                | Clinton | Bush | Obama | Trump               |
|----------------|---------|------|-------|---------------------|
| Totals         | 25 (197)| 27 (157)| 23 (126)| unknown*           |
| Before         | 18 (48) | 21 (87)| 23 (111)| 24 (117)           |
| After          | 22 (149)| 21 (70)| 7* (15)* | unknown*           |
| Revolving door | 15      | 15   | 7*     | unknown*           |

Note: The data on Clinton, Bush and Obama were collected at a time when it was too early to establish the extent to which Obama’s selected foreign-policy makers assumed corporate positions after leaving office, which is why that number is still comparatively low. The same applies to the Trump administration of course, since the data were collected just after he and his team assumed office.

In the earlier post-cold war administrations, we found that, on leaving government, the majority of foreign-policy makers returned to high-level positions in the corporate sector, but that they sometimes returned to government years later, thus authenticating...
the pervasive ‘revolving door pattern’ (see Table 2). We argue that the positions that foreign-policy makers hold prior to assuming office influence their decisions in office, for their earlier experiences colour their worldview and shape their ideas and interests. While this causal mechanism does not of course apply to positions held after being in office, it remains relevant. In fact, the revolving door pattern we noted in the previous administrations suggests that a large portion of top foreign-policy makers are not only recruited to politics from the corporate world, but also alternate between the two worlds and, in that sense, should be seen as an integral part of the corporate elite.

Although it is too soon to say whether this revolving door pattern will apply to Trump’s foreign-policy officials, the expectation is that it will insofar as we expect many of those who came from the business world to return there. It is less certain whether, after another stint in the private sector they will return to government, but the usual revolving-door pattern to date has been one in which the door revolves several times. Typical government officials are called ‘in-and-outers’. For example, someone with a law degree might start out as a government official in one administration, then leave government for the private sector, only to return later, usually at a higher level, in the next administration. Thus far, this has hardly been the pattern for Trump’s cabinet members and advisers, since only two of them – Lighthizer and Sullivan – have held prior high-level federal government positions, in their cases sandwiched between top jobs as corporate law firm partners in the private sector.

Although from the number of corporate connections and the number of connected officials, the Trump administration seems to display as much continuity as its predecessors – and certainly no radical ‘draining of the swamp’ in terms of corporate affiliations – we still need to establish what kind of corporate elite Trump’s inner circle represents. To do so, we need to move to a lower level of aggregation. A first important indicator in this regard is sectoral differences.

Sectoral differences are significant because the corporate community is by no means homogeneous. Of particular relevance to the theme of this current issue is the division between nationally oriented and transnationally oriented capital, as well as between financial capital (banks, insurance companies and other financial institutions) and non-financial capital (industry and services). These distinctions overlap insofar as financial capital is generally transnationally oriented, and both financial capital and (large-scale) industrial transnational capital tend to have an ideological outlook that in recent decades is closely associated with neoliberalism (van Apeldoorn 2002: 27–30; van Apeldoorn and de Graaff 2016: 73–8). Our earlier findings on the corporate elite networks of America’s top foreign-policy makers showed a predominance of transnationally oriented capital, indicated for example by the relatively large share of Fortune 500 notated corporations and the dominant presence of financial capital. The predominance of transnationally oriented big capital – we argued – explained some of the ingrained continuities in US foreign policy, in particular its ‘open-door’ strategy, which is a liberal internationalist foreign policy aimed at opening up and penetrating foreign markets (van Apeldoorn and de Graaff 2016: 73–8).

To assess the extent to which the Trump administration represents a break in this regard, we will first look at the sectoral distribution of the corporate affiliations and
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compare the Trump administration with the other post-cold war administrations. Figure 2 below shows the results.

**Figure 2: Sectoral comparisons between Clinton, Bush, Obama and Trump**

Source: own data collection.

The first conclusion is that not only does the financial sector dominate all others in all administrations apart from Clinton’s, but also that in the Trump administration it is even larger than in the previous administrations, totalling almost 40 per cent. Combined with the law firm/consultancy sector, these two sectors, which are generally trans-nationally oriented, make up more than 50 per cent of the total, which is similar in all four post-cold war administrations. Trump’s top officials in this regard do not seem to deviate from this pattern.

A second finding is that, notwithstanding the relative dominance of these two sectors, there is still a diversity of sectors, with all major industries represented. This indicates a broad social base in terms of the links between the foreign-policy-making core of US government and US capital. If the two best represented sectors are taken together, this still leaves about 45–50 per cent distributed among the remaining sectors (and in the case of Bush even more). It is in this sense that, also in the case of the Trumpian foreign-policy-making elite, we observe the more general cross-sectoral interests of the corporate elite coming to the fore in what is a broad-based network.

Another way of assessing the transnational orientation of connected corporations is to look at whether they have a *Fortune 500* (F500) or *Forbes Global 500* (G500)
notation, which is a commonly used indicator for this type of research because it shows that these corporations are among the largest TNCs in America or globally, as listed annually by the business magazines *Fortune* and *Forbes* respectively. We therefore coded all the foreign-policy makers’ previous post-cold war corporate connections according to whether the firms had a mention in the year of measurement (that is 1993, 2001, 2009, 2017) or previously. Figure 3 below shows the result.

**Figure 3: Share F500 notated firms in corporate networks compared from Clinton to Trump**

Source: own data collection.

Here, the Trumpian corporate elite shows a distinctive pattern. While a relatively high proportion of the connected corporations in the other three administrations have a F500/G500 notation – 35 per cent for both Clinton and Obama and 43 per cent for Bush – this is significantly lower for Trump, at only 17 per cent. This suggests that the kind of firms to which Trump’s foreign-policy makers connect are on average smaller and include fewer large transnational corporations than the other administrations. This partly different profile might also translate into a different outlook in terms of the interests, values and ideas prevailing in these networks and thus a partly different worldview among these corporate elites turned policy makers.

Moreover, although the finance sector is taken to represent transnationally oriented capital, this category, as is conventional, also contains real estate. The presence of the latter appears much bigger under Trump than in previous administrations. While representing financial (investment) capital in several respects, real estate tends to have less of a global outlook than big Wall Street banks and, for instance, does not share the latter’s strong interest in global free markets. This then points to the need to move to an even more disaggregated level to assess the individual corporations involved.

Figure 4 shows a two-mode network of policy makers (circles) and their previous
corporate connections (squares), with the size expressing the degree of centrality (the total number of connected ties to each node) and, to make the graph readable, with only the shared affiliations and the ‘big linkers’ (with >3 corporate ties) labelled.

Figure 4: Two-mode network of the prior corporate affiliations of officials in the Trump administration (2017)

Source: own data collection.

What we find here is a rather mixed picture. The only firm, on the basis of our original selection, recurrently connected to Trump officials was in fact the Wall Street icon Goldman Sachs, against which Trump had so often railed during his campaign. Once elected, rather than dismissing the corrupt politicians ‘bought and paid for by Wall Street’, Trump in fact appointed many of them to key positions in his administration, of which four appear in our sample of 30. Steve Mnuchin, Trump’s treasury secretary, had been a partner at Goldman Sachs and had held at least five top positions in the firm since 1994, and Gary Cohn, the director of the National Economic Council, had been president of Goldman Sachs and co-chief organization officer (COO) for more than ten years. When Cohn left the administration in April 2018, he was replaced by Larry Kudlow, who while also a firm believer in tax cuts for corporations and high-income earners, had no links with Goldman Sachs, but had instead had a long Wall Street career at Bear Stearns, the major investment bank that failed to survive the 2008 financial crisis. Bannon, arguably one of the president’s most important whisperers during the campaign and during his early period in office, and Scaramucci, a loyal supporter of Trump and informal adviser (until his ten days as communications director), had also worked for Goldman Sachs in the 1980s and 1990s.

Among the individual corporations connected to Trump’s foreign-policy officials (which, for the sake of legibility, are not labelled in the graph), are some of the world’s most globally oriented TNCs, including Boeing, Exxon Mobil, Dyncorp, major Wall
Street law firms such as Skadden and former Wall Street ‘icons’ like Lehman Brothers. While the overall share of large TNCs (as listed in the Fortune 500) is significantly lower than in previous administrations, we still find several of the most well-known examples of American ‘big capital’ represented here.

Most of these are not recurrently connected to this sample, which is markedly different from that of earlier administrations. In fact, the only other shared corporate affiliation (aside from Goldman Sachs) is that of Donald Trump and his daughter Ivanka, whom he has made his adviser, which is a controversial appointment given that both are intimately involved in the family-inherited and family-run business, the Trump Organization. While only represented as one tie here, this corporate connection is different from the others because it refers to a business conglomerate made up of literally hundreds of smaller companies, subsidiaries and offshore investment vehicles.

The latter also applies to Ivanka’s other corporate tie, Ivanka Trump Inc, and to a somewhat lesser extent to the corporate networks of her husband Jared Kushner, senior adviser to the president. According to her public financial disclosure report at the time, Ivanka Trump is associated with 292 corporate entities and Kushner with 266. The total number of corporate entities listed for Trump himself number 515 according to the disclosure report he filed when a candidate. Most of these ‘positions’ refer to subsidiaries (of subsidiaries), investment vehicles and other corporate constructions, all of which fall into a separate category we call ‘business conglomerates’, which are quite distinct from the other corporate ties we have so far encountered.

The presence of such business conglomerates points to another distinguishing characteristic of the Trumpian corporate elite. While in previous administrations, the dominant pattern was of people sitting on multiple corporate boards of large, often transnational, corporations, in the case of Trump a considerable number of the corporate affiliations consist of ties to what are often a whole network of smaller businesses and investment vehicles founded or co-founded by the individuals themselves. Steve Bannon and commerce secretary Wilbur Ross, to some extent, also conform to this model of self-made entrepreneur and financier. Having made many millions, or even billions, in this way, they arguably do not belong to America’s corporate establishment, for their profile is distinctly different from any found in the earlier administrations we examined.

In sum, while we find some continuation in terms of corporate networks, the Trump presidency, at least partly, seems to have propelled a different kind of corporate elite into the White House and US government, one that is less conventional and less at the core of what has for a long time been the US corporate power elite. However, as Domhoff (2009) and others argue, the latter kind of corporate elite forms a power elite because it is at the same time interlocked with the policy-planning world. We shall now look at the extent to which the pattern here too deviates in the case of the Trump network.

Policy planning networks
As mentioned above, the policy planning network (established by think tanks, research
institutes, foundations and the likes) is a key part of the foreign-policy elite. Illustrative in this regard is how Richard N. Haass, a former president of the Council on Foreign Relations, identifies two crucial functions of American think tanks – one is to generate “‘new thinking’ that affects the way US decision-makers perceive and respond to the world” (Haass, quoted in McGann 2007: 91), the other is to ‘help presidents and cabinet secretaries fill these [executive branch] positions’ (McGann 2007: 92). In other words, the people in the network of elite think tanks are often not just foreign-policy planners, but also often become, or have been, foreign-policy makers, that is, they not only generate ideas or ‘new thinking’ as Haass puts it, but they also occupy a position of power from which they can actually implement their ideas.

Indeed, a key finding on the networks of the three previous administrations was that the overwhelming majority of foreign-policy/strategy makers had affiliations with the policy planning network prior to their appointments – 26 and 25 respectively in the case of Clinton and Obama, and 22 in the case of the Bush administration. They held 209, 211 and 162 ties respectively to a total of slightly more than 300 policy planning bodies (see Table 3). Moreover, we found that, around two-thirds of them (as of 2013, when these data were collected, naturally fewer for Obama), returned to the policy planning network after their stint in government (van Apeldoorn and de Graaff 2016: 78–9). At the top of the American foreign-policy elite there is thus a significant overlap between the policy planning elite and the policy making elite (which is hardly accounted for in the literature discussed in the introduction to this special issue). At least, that used to be the case until the Trump presidency.

As table 3 shows, the network of Trump’s foreign-policy makers clearly diverges from this pattern. This is not only in terms of the number of foreign-policy makers with previous ties to a policy planning body, which is significantly lower than for his predecessors, though still more than 50 per cent, but particularly in terms of the number of those ties, which with 39 in total is only a fraction of those for Obama (133) and Bush (131).

Table 3: Overview of policy-planning linkers and policy-planning affiliations per administration

|                | Clinton | Bush  | Obama | Trump            |
|----------------|---------|-------|-------|------------------|
| Totals         | 26 (209)| 22 (211)| 25 (162)| unknown*        |
| Before         | 23 (70) | 21 (131)| 25 (133)| 17 (39)         |
| After          | 24 (139)| 21 (80)| 15 (29)*| unknown*        |
| Revolving door | 21      | 20    | 15*   | unknown*        |

Source: own data collection.

Moreover, and arguably more significantly, when mapping the actual networks and identifying the kind of policy planning bodies involved in these networks, we find a dramatically different pattern for the Trump administration. A comparative analysis of
the policy planning networks connected to the three previous administrations, resulted in a core network of policy planning bodies to which foreign-policy makers of all three administrations had been connected before, and in many cases also after, assuming office, alongside distinctive networks connected to each administration (Figure 5).13

Figure 5: Overview of policy planning networks (before assuming office in the Clinton, Bush and Obama administrations)

Source: van Apeldoorn and de Graaff (2016: 80).

One can regard this core of the central policy planning bodies that connect all three presidencies as forming an extensive, solid and common source of policy advice and planning shared between the different administrations. As such, it can be considered an enduring platform for forging common interests and bridging partisan and (other) ideological divides. While our previous research is limited to the post-cold war era, other, though less systematic, research suggests that several of the same policy planning bodies in this core network were closely linked to administrations during the cold war (van Apeldoorn and de Graaff 2016: 44–55). We are thus dealing with a foreign-policy planning elite that goes back many decades, illustrating that, notwithstanding the wide diversity of an estimated total of 1830 US think tanks (McGann 2015: 10), which is often mistakenly taken to reflect the pluralist nature of US political culture, very few of them are ‘winning’ the ‘war of ideas’ McGann 2007: 2). These think tanks, although largely established and funded domestically have both a national and in many cases a transnational outlook.

The most centrally connected think tank in this core network is the venerable Council on Foreign Relations (CFR). Founded in 1921, the CFR was influential in
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creating a more globalist consensus during the interwar debate, so moving the United States away from isolationism, towards expansionism and, ultimately, towards the creation of a US liberal world order after the Second World War (Parmar 2004; Shoup and Minter 2004). While in that sense this nationally-based think tank clearly has a transnationally oriented profile, we also identify two quintessential transnational planning bodies within the core policy-planning network, namely the Bilderberg Group (or Conference), and the Trilateral Commission. Bilderberg, which was founded in the 1950s, played an especially important role in fostering an elite transatlantic consensus during the cold war (van der Pijl 1984). A more recent study by Richardson et al. (2011), identifies Bilderberg as still playing an important role in transnational, albeit US-centred, processes of elite consensus formation in the contemporary era.

The banker David Rockefeller and President Carter’s once national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski founded the Trilateral Commission in 1973 to promote the integration of the political and economic elites of an economically rejuvenated Western Europe, and of a rising Japan, and to tie these elites into a continuation of US global hegemony (Shoup and Minter 2004: 167–72). With its members occupying most of the key positions in the Carter administration by the late 1970s, from the 1980s onwards the Trilateral Commission began to adopt an increasingly neoliberal outlook (Gill 1990: 98–111). When the cold war ended, the Trilateral Commission remained a key medium of transnational elite power, but above all an institutional node through which the American power elite linked up with European and Asian elites and, thereby, arguably shoring up US hegemony. Indeed, we would suggest that its importance in this respect is testified by the fact that so many of the key foreign-policy makers in America’s past three administrations had been Trilateralists, including for instance President Bill Clinton and Bush’s vice president, Cheney. Other influential and central policy planning bodies within this network are the Aspen Institute, which has a clearly transnational outlook, especially through its so-called Aspen Strategy Group, and the Atlantic Council, both of which consistently promote American open-door globalism.

Strikingly, from our mapping of his original team, hardly any of these think tanks – so central to top foreign-policy makers over the past decades across both Democratic and Republican administrations – are connected to Trump’s ‘inner circle’. Figures 6a, 6b and 6c map the policy planning networks of the Bush, Obama and Trump administrations respectively.

First, these figures reveal that, in contrast to the others, the foreign-policy makers surrounding Trump hardly establish any networks at all. Second, they lack a cohesive connection to the central policy-planning bodies mentioned above. We found that only three foreign-policy makers were affiliated to the CFR. Within this component (see lower righthand side of Figure 6c), we find that the conservative Hoover Institution is another shared affiliation, as are a few of the individual connections to establishment think tanks, such as the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) and the Center for a New American Security. Indeed, these officials – Secretary of Defense Mattis, National Security Adviser McMaster and first deputy National Security Adviser
McFarland – can be seen to represent a group that is somewhat closer to the Republican establishment, with Mattis and McMaster often described by that same establishment as among the so-called ‘adults in the room’ (Mann 2017). However, it should be noted that these three officials have now left the administration, which at least in the case of Jim Mattis was because of publicly stated foreign-policy differences with Trump (New York Times 2018).

Figure 6a: Policy planning network Bush

Source: adapted from van Apeldoorn and de Graaff 2016: 152.

Figure 6b: Policy planning network Obama

Source: adapted from van Apeldoorn and de Graaff 2016: 198
Aside from these few examples there is no resemblance with the features so common to the previous administrations. Of particular relevance for the theme of this special issue, moreover, is the disconnect with the transnational policy planning networks: there is not a single connection to the Trilateral Commission or to Bilderberg, which, as we have seen, were central in all past three administrations and, as described above, key transnational policy planning bodies for the continuation of US-centred ‘open-door’ globalism, nor to other policy-planning bodies that can be identified as key nodes in the network of America’s transnationalist foreign-policy elite such as Aspen or the Atlantic Council. This distinctive pattern and profile of the Trumpian foreign-policy elite arguably constitutes the most drastic discontinuity with regard to his predecessors.

We have interpreted these policy planning bodies as key sources for the worldview of the affiliated foreign-policy makers. We believe that the core policy-planning network that the three post-cold war administrations preceding Trump shared partly explain the continuation of the open-door ideology and the goals of the grand strategy. In addition, we took the administrations’ distinctive networks to be important reasons for variations in the means with which the open-door goals were seen to be achieved – here, in particular, the extensive connections of the neoconservative think tanks and advocacy platforms to the G. W. Bush administration stood out (van Apeldoorn and de Graaff 2016, chapter 3).

The Trumpian foreign-policy elites’ disconnection from these networks arguably has implications for the formulation of their foreign-policy making and, perhaps, also accounts for the lack of any discernible ‘grand’ strategy. Moreover, the absence of alternative policy planning networks highlights the need to look elsewhere for the
Trumpian foreign-policy elites’ worldview. In fact, the only other mini cluster we find in Trump’s – by now former – top advisers’ policy-planning affiliations is in the shared affiliation of Conway and Bannon to the Council for National Policy (see upper right corner of Figure 6c). This, tellingly, is a somewhat secretive networking organization, which the New York Times described as ‘a little-known club of a few hundred of the most powerful conservatives in the country’ (Kirkpatrick 2004), aimed at strengthening the conservative nationalist movement, which, according to its website, favours ‘limited government, strong national defense, and the belief in Judeo–Christian values as founding to the nation’ (Council for National Policy 2017).

In lieu of a conclusion: is a new Trumpian elite replacing the transnationalist foreign-policy elite?

In this article, we set out to assess to what extent and how the Trump presidency represents a break with extant power structures in American politics. We focused in particular on its foreign-policy-making elite, which, as we have shown, has in recent decades been substantively linked to a transnationally oriented corporate and policy planning elite – the theme of this special issue. Building further on our earlier study of three post-cold war administrations, we conducted a comparative analysis of the social networks of these past administrations’ top foreign-policy makers and those of the Trump administration. We found two types of network affiliations – corporate affiliations and policy-planning affiliations – of key importance in this context; we also distinguished between the national and transnational orientations of these affiliations. In addition, we looked at federal government positions held in previous administrations, thus allowing us to assess the extent of their affiliation to the foreign-policy establishment and their political experience.

Our key findings were first that, unlike the Clinton, Bush and Obama administrations, Trump’s officials had hardly any prior experience in federal state positions. Only two of the 30 top foreign-policy makers in our sample, Lighthizer and Sullivan, had previous affiliations to the Reagan and Bush administrations respectively, which confirms the popular impression that Trump’s inner circle consists predominantly of outsiders to the foreign-policy establishment. Moreover, his historically slow and low rate of appointing people to the more junior levels of the State department arguably aggravated this lack of experience.

We found signs of both continuity and real change in terms of corporate affiliations. While in his campaign Trump often railed against a mostly unspecified elite, he in fact appointed more businessmen and billionaires to his administration than any president before him. Apart from having appointed leading representatives of big capital – for example, long-time top executive of the world’s largest oil company ExxonMobil, Rex Tillerson, as Secretary of State, and Goldman Sachs insiders Gary Cohn and Steve Mnuchin as head of the National Economic Council and secretary of the Treasury respectively – Trump’s administration not only has more foreign-policy makers with prior corporate affiliations than the preceding post-cold war administrations we analysed, but together they also held the highest number of top corporate affiliations.
This largely confirms – and in fact extends rather than breaks with – the deep and intimate personal links between America’s corporate community and its political system. In fact, in this regard, these interlinkages show no rupture with extant elite power structures. We found another sign of continuity in the dominance of the financial sector, which includes real estate and insurance. This sector, with which almost 40 per cent of Trump’s top officials had prior corporate affiliations, in combination with (corporate) law and consultancy, constitutes more than half of the sectors present, thus comprising the largest block. This is consistent with our findings on the previous administrations and indicates a dominance of transnationally oriented capital. However, the larger presence of real estate in Trump’s administration shows a deviation from the profile of big Wall Street finance. In addition, we found another significant indicator of transnationally oriented capital – the presence of F500 or G500 notated firms in the Clinton, Bush and Obama administrations was much greater than in that of Trump, in fact 35–45 per cent compared with only 17 per cent in the Trump administration.

This seems to indicate that the Trumpian foreign-policy elite is as extensively connected to the world of business and finance as previous administrations, but that its profile is different. Indeed, with Trump, a distinctive kind of corporate elite – one that is less conventional and less at the core of elite US corporate power – seems to have been propelled into power. This is also apparent, albeit at a more disaggregated level, in the individual networks of Trump and his closest advisers, such as his family members Ivanka Trump and Jared Kushner, his commerce secretary Wilbur Ross, and his former chief strategist Steve Bannon. With their own large networks of privately-owned businesses, these businessmen–entrepreneurs comprise a type of elite that is quite different from the corporate ‘big linkers’ who sit on the multiple boards of the large established US transnational corporations.

The most significant discontinuity we found, however, was in the domain of policy planning. Here, our analysis reveals that all the top foreign-policy makers in the post-cold war administrations preceding Trump’s presidency were embedded in a central network of elite policy planning institutes funded and directed by representatives of the corporate community, many of whom were simultaneously on the boards of transnationally oriented corporations. Yet, with only three ties to the CFR and none at all to transnational or transnationally oriented policy planning bodies such as the TC, Bilderberg or Aspen Institute, Trump’s team is largely disconnected from this network and his top advisers show no evidence of having formed any alternative ones.

In sum, the Trumpian foreign-policy elite is poorly integrated into the transnational foreign-policy elite that had such close links with all three former administrations. We thus observe a real and significant break with the previous configuration of elite power. In the past, these policy-planning networks played a key role in formulating, shaping and circulating the ideas that fed into US foreign policy and that helped to shape a broadly shared consensus on America’s global role and, despite intra-elite differences over means, on its open-door foreign-policy goals. That there are hardly any links between these networks and Trump’s foreign-policy-making elite has significant implications for formulating and implementing foreign policy under his presidency.
The extent of the implications of this partial break with longstanding elite power structures in American politics and how enduring the resultant changes in the country’s foreign policy and global role are likely to be will only become clear in the years to come. With a Democratic majority in the House of Representatives, pressure on Trump is mounting. At the same time, and more fundamentally, Trump’s rise to the presidency has laid bare a crisis of elite power and leadership that will not easily be reversed on either the Republican or Democratic side and will not end with the conclusion of the Trump administration (either in 2020 or 2024). The transnational foreign policy elite in the USA has lost its self-evident and self-complacent dominance, for Trump’s new foreign-policy-making elite has made a partial break with longstanding elite networks and power structures in US politics. This might result in very different societal coalitions, ideas and worldviews competing for power in the coming political battles, notably the presidential elections in 2020.

This then points to an exciting new research agenda. First, there is a need to look into the new societal coalitions being formed before the forthcoming presidential elections and to map what kinds of networks, organizations, resources, distinctive interests, ideas and worldviews are linked to these policy actors. Second, we need to engage in further research that connects the network findings presented in this article to a closer analysis of the underlying worldviews, as expressed in the documents and speeches of the Trump administration and its key policy makers, and to see how these possibly conflicting views translate into actual foreign-policy decisions and into a more or less coherent overall foreign-policy strategy. Finally, we need to investigate to what extent similar dynamics are at play in established elite power structures elsewhere in the world, as in Europe where there are challenges from Brexit and from the rise of populist leaders and movements throughout the continent. With this article we have aimed to provide a first step towards such a research agenda.

Notes
1. What in the introduction to this special issue are identified as ‘societal elites’ are linked to ‘policy elites’, which are in fact often part of the same elite (cf. Figure 1 in the introduction to this special issue).
2. Indeed, as Walt (2018: 40) recalls, even before Trump’s election, 122 former Republican national security officials warned about candidate Trump’s views on foreign policy and declared him unfit for office.
3. Our approach thus represents a quite different conception of what in the introduction to this special issue is categorized as the ‘hegemony’ approach. We do not adopt the view that a transnational (or transatlantic) capitalist class is acting autonomously from the state and from that position influencing a national elite or capitalist class. Rather, we find that a nationally based foreign policy making elite is closely connected to and partly overlaps a corporate community, and that the interests of a policy planning network in which transnationally oriented capital is predominant become closely aligned with transnational policy (and corporate) elites.
4. We have deviated somewhat in our current selection compared with our former analyses, since we found that certain structural positions we had included there, such as deputies
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chief of staff and (ordinary) members of the Council of Economic Advisers of less influence and significance than we had earlier thought. We also think that it is better to keep two-thirds constant and one-third variable in terms of the kind of positions across the administrations.

5. Subsequently, some influential advisers prior to the establishment of the administration, including James Jay Carafano, who acted as foreign policy adviser to Trump’s transition team and is an influential figure in the Heritage Foundation and key supporter of the America First agenda, are not included.

6. We would like to extend our gratitude to Victoria Crocker (MSc) who did a tremendous job as research assistant helping us with the arduous work of collecting these data manually through online web research and document analysis.

7. An ego network consists of all relevant (predefined) types of ties of an individual node in a network (in this case a person).

8. To illustrate, almost a year into his presidency less than 35 per cent of the more than 600 key executive positions were confirmed and roughly 40 per cent remained without a nominee, including more than two dozen assistant secretary and undersecretary positions.

9. In recent years, the list has been expanded to Fortune 1000 and Global 2000 and, in five of the cases included, the position was above 500. It should be noted that there are of course additional measures and indicators to assess the transnationality of corporations, such as the number of assets or revenue held or generated abroad, that could be applied. Such a level of detail was not employed in the present analysis, but it could be an interesting avenue to pursue in further research.

10. These disclosure forms can be found at: www.politico.com/story/2017/03/white-house-staff-financial-disclosure-forms-236770.

11. See: https://edition.cnn.com/2015/07/22/politics/donald-trump-personal-financial-disclosure-report/index.html.

12. The numbers in parentheses refer to the total number of ties to the policy planning bodies of the respective policy makers, but since several policy makers can have ties to the same policy planning bodies (Figure 5) the total number of the latter are lower than the total number of ties (and not shown in the table).

13. Figure 5 represents a two-mode network of the policy planning affiliations of all three administrations’ foreign policy makers held before assuming their government position. The results were clustered per administration to make the graph readable, which implies that the individual actors (foreign policy makers) in this figure are represented by the lines (ties) between the administrations (circles) and the policy planning institutes (squares). The number of actors connected to a policy planning body is expressed through ‘tie strength’ – a thicker line thus means that more foreign policy makers are affiliated with this policy-planning institute. Only the shared affiliations are labelled (van Apeldoorn and de Graaff 2016: 80).

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