In this tightly-written and richly-sourced article, Rosella Cappella Zielinski and Kaija Schilde offer a theory to explain why some U.S. presidents have been able to make targeted military spending cuts according to strategic needs whereas others were forced into blunt across-the-board cuts to assuage entrenched domestic interests. Although developed from U.S. cases, the authors expect that their theoretical framework has generalizability to other countries.

Zielinski and Schilde build their framework on neo-classical realist assumptions, including that the state acts as a rational actor. The “foreign policy executive” (meaning broadly the president and top national security advisors in the context of the United States) is presumed to respond strategically to threats and opportunities presented within the international system (683). Yet, in line with this variant of realism, the authors also readily acknowledge that the executive has to negotiate with and is sometimes blocked by domestic actors and constituencies.

Accordingly, if the nation was faced with the need to cut military spending because a war ended or because of a fiscal crisis, the executive would, by the authors’ assumptions, push for spending cuts that were targeted. The executive would first “rank, prioritize, and assess amongst likely strategic challenges” within the international environment; then the executive would “identify the appropriate offices, programs, line items, or service branches” needed to meet the challenges and those which are not (677).

However, the politics of defense budget cuts invites the mobilization of parochial interests. By picking which weapons systems, bases, or programs will receive less money, the executive’s planning disproportionately affects some congressional districts, defense industries, or service branches over others as they lose jobs, contracts, or personnel—it creates winners and losers. If domestic resistance is strong enough, the executive’s
strategic planning may be stymied. The executive may then concede to equal-sacrifice, across-the-board cuts that diffuse costs among many actors and interests.

Zielinski and Schilde’s central research question is: Under which conditions can the executive overcome internal resistance and achieve targeted cuts? (683). Their key explanatory variable is that it depends on the nature of the threat environment.

At first glance, this might seem like an unoriginal and obvious explanation. Given familiar theories about how public opinion gels against a common threat, we would not be surprised to find that a dangerous international environment causes other domestic leaders and the public to support a president, quieting partisan bickering and selfish lobbying. In times of high threat, the president’s power vis-à-vis Congress increases. Extending this logic, if a specific war—such as the Korean War—ends during a period of continued high threat, we might expect that the executive would have more latitude to strategically restructure priorities to face a continuing fight against an identifiable enemy than if the international environment is seen as being more benign.

But this well-known explanation is not what Zielinski and Schilde have in mind. They do not emphasize the intensity of external threats or the unifying effects of fear as the factor that helps presidents overcome parochial interests. Instead, they conceptualize the threat environment and its relationship to executive capacity in a more nuanced manner. It is the number and variety of different threats (independent of their intensity) that matters. In their words: “[w]e argue that the threat environment—specifically, the degree to which it is diverse—conditions the number of available policy options and, in turn, executive capacity to implement targeted cuts vis-a-vis parochial interests” (678, emphasis added).

“Threat diversity” can be high, producing multiple policy options, or it can be low, even “singular,” producing a narrower set of options (684). The idea is that when multiple threats exist, there is more ambiguity about the appropriate hierarchy of threats, which opens political space through which parochial

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4 Indeed, Zielinski and Schilde find that both Ford and Clinton—presidents who governed when international affairs were not widely seen as dangerous—were successful in resisting parochial interests and enacting targeted cuts. Gallup has asked the poll question “What do you think is the most important problem facing this country today” since 1935. The periods after the Vietnam War, in the mid-1970s, and after the Cold War, in the early 1990s, are clear low points in terms of public concerns about external threats. See Tom W. Smith, “The Polls: America’s Most Important Problems Part I: National and International,” The Public Opinion Quarterly 49:2 (Summer 1985): 264-274. See also, Gregor Aisch and Alicia Parlapiano, ““What Do You Think Is the Most Important Problem Facing This Country Today?’” The New York Times (27 February 2017), https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/02/27/us/politics/most-important-problem-gallup-polling-question.html.
interests can flow in and influence the budgetary process. With fewer threats and fewer options, the executive can succeed in executing targeted cuts over parochial interests.

To test this threat-diversity theory, Zielinski and Schilde use case studies selected based on two criteria: 1) when overall military spending cuts are deep enough (at least ten percent of the entire military budget) and 2) when they last long enough (at least two consecutive years of cuts).

They identify four periods overseen by six different presidents and find significant variation in whether cuts were done by “scalpel” or “hatchet.” On one side, the Dwight Eisenhower administration following the Korean War (FY 1953-1955), the Gerald Ford administration following the Vietnam War (FY 1974-1976), and the Bill Clinton administration, which was still readjusting to the end of the Cold War (FY 1994-1997), were all able to cut military spending in a targeted and strategic fashion. In contrast, the Richard Nixon administration, which was then facing congressional pressure to cut spending as it was drawing down troops out of Vietnam (FY 1970-1973), the George H.W. Bush administration, which was in office when the Cold War ended (FY1989-1993), and the Barack Obama administration, with the Iraq War ending in an era of budget deficits (FY 2011-2014), were all forced to apply blunt across-the-board cuts.

The reason for the different approaches, Zielinski and Schilde argue, is that the threat environment was more “singular” during the Eisenhower, Ford and Clinton administrations and more “diverse” for the Nixon, Bush and Obama administrations. Their argument hinges on this distinction.

Some of their case studies are uncontroversial. For example, I would not quibble with the view that during the Eisenhower administration, “the singularity of the monolithic and immediate Soviet threat” enhanced the president’s ability to enact his New Look strategy without much opposition (691).5 It also makes sense that “the hierarchy of relative threat urgency was unclear” (691) while Nixon pursued détente with the Soviet Union, opened relations with China, and struggled to resolve the conflict in Vietnam. Likewise, the Bush administration faced a turbulent period with the Berlin Wall coming down in 1989, Saddam Hussein attacking Kuwait in 1990, and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. With their focus on reunifying Germany, preventing Iraqi aggression, and controlling loose nuclear weapons in former Soviet Republics, the characterization that the Bush administration faced a multitude of new threats seems obvious.

The Ford and Clinton cases are less compelling. To begin with, an argument could be made that the Ford administration should not be included in the analysis. In current dollars, the military budget in 1974 was $77.9 billion; it rose to $84.9 billion in 1975, to $87.9 in 1976, and $95.1 billion in 1977.6 In constant dollars (FY 2012), it did decline (inflation was high) but not as deeply as during the Nixon years: from $363.3 billion in 1974 to $350.3 billion in 1977.7 As Zielinski and Schilde themselves observe, “the FY 1974

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5 Of course, the threat was not just singular—it was also intense—so whether Eisenhower’s capability arose from consensus due to common fear or from the singularity of options is not discernable.


DOD [Department of Defense] budget emerged from Congress with only modest cuts. The following year, FY 1975, the administration’s budget request garnered no major opposition” (698). The inclusion of these years seems to violate the case selection criteria of looking for periods of drastic cuts.

The Ford administration also raises issues about how one measures “singularity” and “diversity” of threats and what those measures mean. Zielinski and Schilde characterize the Ford administration as perceiving a renewed challenge from the Soviet Union: “Policymakers experienced a less diverse threat environment with a renewed focus on a narrower range of strategic issues, specifically on the strategic concerns over Soviet superiority” (698). The Ford administration initially continued Nixon’s policy of détente; the co-architect of that policy, Henry Kissinger, remained on as Secretary of State. True, Defense Secretary James Schlesinger forcefully advocated for a higher defense budget by focusing on a scenario wherein the United States could fall behind in the long-term competition with the Soviet Union unless current budget cutting stopped. He stressed “adverse trends” with the Soviet Union, which in his view “sold reasonably well on Capitol Hill.”

But Ford and Schlesinger did not agree on the priority of increasing defense spending. Ford fired Schlesinger in part because of his strong views on the defense budget. Outside the administration, high-profile conservative critics mobilized to push for a reinvigorated containment of the Soviet Union, as epitomized by the efforts of the Committee on the Present Danger (CPD). President Ford and CIA Director George H.W. Bush eventually conceded to their pressure, allowing hawkish outside experts to do an independent analysis of the Soviet threat—the so-called ‘Team B’—using classified information in response to criticisms that the intelligence community had been underestimating the Soviet threat. Put differently, some individuals within the Ford administration and some powerful critics outside of it did push for a more singular view of the international threat environment—and one that emphasized a more intense threat—posed by the Soviet Union; still, perceptions about the nature of the threat environment remained contested. Indeed, the incoming president, Jimmy Carter, did not share the dire portrait conservatives painted about the Soviet military build-up.

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10 While the founding members of the CPD had mobilized during the Nixon and Ford administrations to challenge intelligence estimates of the Soviet threat, they did not formally create the CPD organization until Jimmy Carter won the 1976 election.


12 In May 1977, Jimmy Carter described the conflict with the Soviet Union as “less intensive” and observed “we are now free of that inordinate fear of communism which once led us to embrace any dictator who joined us in that fear.” Jimm Carter, “Address at Commencement Exercises at the University of Notre Dame,” 22 May 1977, The
The authors’ least convincing case is the Clinton administration. Zielinski and Schilde argue that initially the “diverse threat environment and broad option set” that had stymied the George H. W. Bush administration continued “into the early years of the Clinton administration” (701). Then, “[b]etween FY 1994 and FY 1997, threat diversity declined” (702). As a result, the “DOD emphasized a singular focus on asymmetrical conflicts and on the use of the military for smaller operations such as peacekeeping” (703, emphasis added). Clinton’s executive capacity increased due to a “narrowed set of policy options” allowing the administration “to implement targeted cuts” (704).

But one could reasonably argue that the United States was continuously presented with a diverse set of international challenges during the 1990s. For example, the 1995 DOD Annual Report to Congress report, which the authors use, observes that “Threats to the interests of the United States, its allies, and its friends can come from a variety of sources.” The report lists: aggression by regional powers, internal ethnic or religious conflicts that can provoke migration and humanitarian crises, the acquisition of weapons of mass destruction by “potential adversaries,” terrorism, drugs, the environment, and more. All of these challenges were inherited from the Bush administration.

Overall, I remain skeptical of Zielinski and Schilde’s theory about the relationship between “threat diversity” and an executive’s ability to make targeted military spending cuts for five reasons. First, it seems implausible that the international landscape really changed enough from the Nixon to the Ford administrations, or from the Bush to the Clinton administrations, to say there was a clear shift from a situation that posed a diversity of threats to one that posed singular threats. Second, policymakers often disagree about the number and importance of external threats. Third, the assumption upon which the authors build their theory—that all executives would seek targeted cuts—may not be a realistic description of presidential behavior. Some presidents may indeed put effort into restructuring military allocations and others might not (perhaps because they are occupied with other priorities). Fourth, the skill with which presidents create a strategy and sell it (perhaps even using the singularity of a threat as a sales tactic) may matter as much as, or more than, the changing conditions in the international environment. Finally, if you subtract the factor of common fear causing support for the president, it is hard to understand why parochial interests would give up the fight for their pet projects. Is the mere clarity of international challenges when separated from the severity of threats enough to stop other domestic actors from mobilizing to challenge an administration’s proposed budget cuts?

Regardless of these reservations, Zielinski and Schilde’s analysis is well executed, innovative, and worth considering.

13 Notice that this happened at a time when “the United States was a unipolar power, with no potent or urgent threats in the near future” (702). This case is the most obvious illustration that “low threat diversity” or “threat singularity” is delinked from necessarily meaning that the single type of threat the country faces stands out because is especially scary.

Shoon Murray is an Associate Professor in the School of International Service at American University. She is the author of Anchors Against Change: American Opinion Leaders’ Beliefs After the Cold War (University of Michigan Press, 1996), The Terror Authorization: History and Politics of the 2001 AUMF (Palgrave Pivot, 2014), and coeditor of Mission Creep: The Militarization of US Foreign Policy? (Georgetown University Press, 2014). Her teaching and research interests include American Foreign Policy, civil-military relations, war powers, decision-making theory, and the role of public opinion, the media, and interest groups in the making of foreign policy. Her current project looks at the balance between the US State Department and the DoD.

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