

DONALD TRUMP'S FOREIGN POLICY: WHAT DO WE KNOW, WHAT CAN WE EXPECT?

Klaus Larres

Member of the Institute for Advanced Study (IAS), Princeton, N.J. He is the Richard M Krasno Distinguished Professor of History and International Affairs at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He also is a Senior Fellow, Center for Transatlantic Relations (CTR), Johns Hopkins University/SAIS, Washington, DC

Donald Trump's victory in the US presidential elections on November 8, 2016, proved to be surprising for many. Most opinion polls had forecast a narrow victory for his opponent Hillary Clinton. Still, Clinton's small lead of a few percentage points in the polls by no means ruled out a victory for the Republican standard bearer during the last few weeks leading up to the election. When Trump managed to win more states and thus more electoral colleges votes than had been deemed likely, this caused a stunned disbelief globally. The general surprise revealed a good degree of wishful thinking on the part of many people within the US and indeed abroad. It mattered little that Clinton had actually won the popular vote with a majority of well over 2.5 million votes. Trump's demagogic, vulgar and simplistic way of dealing with serious internal and external policy issues during the campaign had convinced many observers that in the end common sense would prevail among American voters. They would not elect a man to the most important elected office in the world who had no political experience, a rather elementary view of global affairs and relied on the non-secure commercial Tweeter network to communicate his beliefs in short, abrupt sentences of 140 characters or less. Those living outside the U.S. were perhaps even more shocked by Trump's victory than people residing in the U.S.

The fallacy of wishful thinking

A similar degree of wishful thinking can be discerned at present when President Trump's foreign policy is discussed in the media and indeed at dinner tables and offices within and without the U.S. Frequently discussants express the belief that Trump will move to the center and may be no longer interested in realizing many of his rather unusual, if not outrageous foreign policy proposals that he announced during the election campaign. It is argued that Trump is not an ideologue with a firm agenda but a pragmatic wheeler-dealer. In fact, in some instances, Trump has indeed moved away from some of his more unrealistic electoral promises. Both his announcement that he will abolish "Obamacare" and build a wall along the Mexican border (and have the Mexicans pay for it) have been quietly abandoned. It is also true that Congress may stand in the way and strike down many of Trump's more extreme domestic and external policy initiatives.

Still, there are at least four good reasons why it should be assumed that the new President will pursue the radical new foreign policy agenda that he promised in vague and general terms during the election campaign.

- 1. Trump himself is deeply convinced of the necessity to change US foreign policy toward Russia, China, the Middle East and Europe. It does not appear that his outrage about the Obama administration's foreign policy toward these countries and areas were only made for electioneering purposes.
- 2. He has selected rather hardline cabinet officers, such as Defense Secretary General James Mattis and National Security Adviser General Michael Flynn, who can be expected to share the new President's foreign policy views in principle though not necessarily with regard to the details. The same goes for Trump's strategic advisor, the controversial hard-right businessman Steve Bannon, Christian Conservative Vice-President Mike Pence, and a number of officials much further down the pecking order.
- 3. If Trump wishes to have a second term (and also perform reasonably well in the mid-term elections in two years' time) he cannot afford to disappoint his supporters and voters too much. Already his decision not to attempt to persecute Hillary Clinton along the dubious lines he repeatedly mentioned in the course of his election campaign has disillusioned many of his core followers.
- 4. Trump, it seems, is a rather self-confident, unpredictable and narcissist person who needs daily attention, drama and the fawning admiration of his supporters. To indulge his need for grandiosity there is no better realm than foreign policy and the necessity of having to meet and deal with some of the world's most well-known and crucially important politicians who sometimes, as in the case with Vladimir Putin, hold the fate of millions in their hands. Trump will not overlook this opportunity to demonstrate to the world how radically transformative he wants to be. And Congress has less powers to interfere in foreign policy matters than in domestic issues.

Donald Trump's radical foreign policy agenda

Unlike all previous presidential candidates Trump never revealed a detailed foreign policy platform during the election campaign. Some of his foreign policy pronouncements were recalled within hours or changed fundamentally within a day or two. It is therefore difficult to predict the substance of Donald Trump's foreign policy, but it is perhaps not entirely impossible.

1. **Europe:** Trump has questioned the financial commitment NATO members make to the alliance. Individual European countries have already started increasing their defense contributions. It can be expected that Trump will continue to push for further 'burden sharing' and that the Europeans will fall in line. Under these

circumstances the U.S. will continue to be committed to NATO, including (probably) the crucial mutual defense clause, Article 5.

Trump will not support the European integration process. He has come out in favor of the UK's Brexit decision. It is thus likely that Trump will return to the U.S. policy of the 1970s and 1980s when Europe and the European integration process were seen as serious economic competitors. Despite official endorsement of the European project, in fact at best only lukewarm support came from Washington during the Nixon, Carter and Reagan administrations (with the Ford administration being the exception).

Transatlantic relations under Trump will be shaky and difficult but there will be no divorce. Trump will realize as Obama and George W Bush recognized that in the end America has no more reliable and trustworthy strategic partner than Europe. For instance, transatlantic trade relations and intelligence cooperation are much too important for America to free itself from its alliance with the Europeans. Of course, the great unknown in the Trump administration's policy toward Europe is how Washington's relations with Russia will develop in the next few years.

2. **Russia, Ukraine and Syria:** similar to President Obama's endeavor at the beginning of his first administration, in all likelihood Trump will also attempt a 're-set' policy with Russia (though of course there will be a different name for this). President Putin has indicated his interest in a new cooperative relationship with the West; if meant seriously, Trump may thus actually have a relatively good chance of improving relations with Russia. From a personality point of view both politicians will get on with each other fabulously: both are superrich macho-megalomaniacs who have an autocratic tendency and share the belief that history is largely made by 'great men.'

The quid-pro-quo scenario much talked about in the media recently is not improbable: Trump may extend de facto (though not de jure) acceptance of the annexation of Crimea and the gradual phasing out of economic sanctions on Russia in return for Moscow's agreement to downgrade its support for the pro-Russians rebels in eastern Ukraine. But Moscow will insist on continuing to have a decisive say in the affairs of Eastern Ukraine. Both leaders may also agree to leave Syrian president Assad in power for the time being (and then find a successor among his Alawite tribe). Russia may agree to work to decrease Iranian involvement in the Syrian civil war with the US in return ceasing its support for the anti-Assad 'moderate' rebels as well as for the Kurds who are attempting to carve out an independent homeland in Syria. On the basis of a deal for joint Russian-American air strikes (and perhaps some ground troops) against ISIS in Syria and elsewhere in the region, all this may then even lead to a cease fire and eventually an armistice in the war in Syria.

Under this scenario an improvement of US-Russian relations would result and perhaps even lead to the revival of bilateral nuclear disarmament initiatives between the two powers. Part of the deal might also well be that Trump administration would agree reluctantly not to undermine the Iranian nuclear deal concluded by six major powers in April 2015. The price to be paid by Washington for a deal with Russia would be stiff however: Crimea would be lost for good, Russian continuing influence in eastern Ukraine would have to be accepted and Russia would remain a major shaping power in the Middle East. Putin's desire to bring his country back as one of the major powers of the world and on equal terms with the U.S. would have been achieved, despite the country's fragile economic situation.

- 3. China and the Pacific:** this may be the greatest unknown in Trump's future foreign policy. During the election campaign Trump accused China of unfair trade and currency practices. Similar to developments in Germany there is also increasing suspicion in the U.S. with regard to Beijing's investment binge in the West. An ever larger number of state-supported Chinese companies are attempting to buy up western high-tech companies to obtain valuable know-how. The new President will do his best to contain this development which undoubtedly will lead to additional friction with China, though not necessarily to a trade war.

Trump has made contradictory statements regarding whether he wishes to largely withdraw his country from the Pacific and leave it to China and the states in S.E. Asia to sort out their neighborly relations, including the South-China Sea dispute. If need be, he said during the election campaign, Japan and South Korea may even have to develop nuclear weapons themselves. Other pronouncements, however, indicate that Trump has no intention to withdraw the U.S. from the Pacific. In fact he may well re-deploy more ships to the area and also increase the strength of the U.S. navy overall. Under Trump an increase in the defense budget and an end of sequestration is likely (the term 'sequestration' refers to the automatic annual cuts to the Pentagon budget enacted by Congress which were meant to last from 2013 and 2021). At present the U.S. navy has between 270 and 280 war ships. With an eye to the significant expansion of Chinese naval construction that has occurred in recent years, Trump advisors (and some senior naval officers such as Admiral Harry Harris and former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mullen) have talked about the necessity to have 350 war ships in total with many (as well as 6 of America's 10 aircraft carriers) being deployed in the Pacific.

US-China relations will face difficult times in the years ahead. Trump's telephone conversation with the Taiwanese president in early December 2016 – the first time since 1979 that a US President or President-elect has talked to the Taiwanese leader was largely

assumed to have taken place due to inexperience and ignorance. Trump has been unwilling to accept advisors from the State Department to give him guidance when talking to foreign leaders. China regards Taiwan as a breakaway province and has zero tolerance for foreign nations not accepting its 'One China policy'. Yet, it soon was revealed by *Politico magazine* that the 93-year-old Bob Dole, the former Senate Majority Leader and 1996 Republican presidential nominee, had lobbied the Trump team for months on behalf of the Taiwanese government. Taipeh compensated Dole's law firm Alston & Bird handsomely for their successful efforts to set up meetings and arrange other contacts with Trump's campaign staff.

When the phone call became known the Foreign Ministry in Beijing protested but otherwise refrained from any more serious reaction regarding wider US-Chinese relations. It put the blame for the call on Taiwanese leader Tsai Ing-wen who had 'tricked' Trump. After all, according to the official Chinese news agency *Xinhua*, visiting former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, also like Dole 93 years old, had informed President Xi Jinping in a 90-minute conversation just before Trump and Tsai's phone call that he believed it was "the expectation of the new administration to facilitate sustained, stable and better growth of U.S.-China relations." Beijing gave Trump the benefit of the doubt not being aware of Dole's lobbying on behalf of Taipeh.

Yet, within days there was a serious social media backlash in China; Foreign Minister Wang Yi was accused of not having been tough enough. Soon the *People's Daily*, the newspaper of the Communist Party, warned Washington that "creating troubles for the China-U.S. relationship is creating troubles for the U.S. itself." Challenging China's policy toward Taiwan "would greatly reduce the chance to achieve the goal of making America great again."

Meanwhile in the US, Trump began to resent the fact that Beijing appeared to think that he needed China's consent to speak with President Tsai. China did not ask the US when it taxed US exports, he tweeted, or when it built "a massive military complex in the middle of the South China Sea" (quoted according to the BBC news website). John Bolton, one of Trump's closest foreign policy advisors, thought that it was time "to shake the relationship up" and do something about China's "aggressive and belligerent claims" in the South China Sea. He told *Fox News* that "nobody in Beijing gets to dictate who we talk to." Even before Trump has moved into the Oval Office relations with China have become seriously strained. This is not a good omen for the future.

Outlook

We will soon have a much clearer idea of new President Trump's foreign policy. It is unlikely that Washington's foreign policy will be characterized by a continuity with the main tenets of Obama's foreign policy. In fact, there will be radical departures in Trump's foreign policy toward Russia, the Middle East and China and to some extent also toward Europe. It must be hoped that the new President is fully aware of the responsibility which rests on his shoulders. Not only is it he who has the finger on the trigger of America's huge nuclear arsenal, it is also the US President who in practice still has the power to decide about war or peace on earth. George W. Bush brought war and widespread misery to Afghanistan and Iraq and it soon spread to other parts of the Middle East. The repercussions are still shaking and undermining Europe and the U.S. itself, as well as many other parts of the globe. Let's hope that Trump and his advisors will learn from history and display greater wisdom and common sense than his Republican predecessor and some of Bush's European disciples in London, Madrid, Eastern Europe, and elsewhere. What the world needs at present are more stability, prosperity and environmental sustainability rather than renewed tension and conflict among the globe's great powers.