

STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS OF DONALD TRUMP'S ELECTION

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ABSTRACT

This paper offers a **general outline** of Trump's **approach to foreign policy** looking at his core beliefs regarding US **military posture and interventions, alliances and free trade arrangements** and at his "**transactional**" approach to international politics. It then assesses the potential trajectory of Trump's foreign policy toward **Russia** and **NATO**, in the **Middle East** and in **East Asia**. How the United States, under Trump's presidency, will respond to the security challenges in these regions, and will shape the patterns of cooperation and competition therein, is likely to shape the future prospects of **American primacy** in world politics.

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INTRODUCTION

The election of Donald Trump as the 45th President of the United States has triggered significant uncertainty worldwide – among US allies, friends and rivals – regarding the future direction of American foreign policy. The reactions to the election results have varied greatly across the globe. Trump's victory has been enthusiastically welcomed by the presidents of Russia,¹ Turkey² and the Philippines³ among others. Similarly, far-right parties – including in Germany, France, Hungary⁴ and Russia⁵ – also reacted cheerfully, with Marine Le Pen hailing “the emergence of a new world”.⁶ In contrast, several countries have expressed concerns over how this election could open a period of uncertainty for international politics, such as France,⁷ Germany,⁸ or South Korea – which convened an emergency meeting of its National Security Council just after the election results to “closely monitor developing relations with the [incoming] Trump administration”.⁹

Assessing the potential trajectory of US foreign policy under Donald Trump, who has been described as “the ultimate black box”,¹⁰ is largely an exercise in conjecture. During the presidential elections Trump took a variety of positions, sometimes contradictory, making it quite hard to gauge whether these positions could be translated into policy. Nonetheless, based on the apparent consistency of some of his statements and beliefs, and of those of his advisers, it is possible to try to ascertain, without engaging in futurology, some emerging trend lines in US foreign policy. To do so, this paper first provides a general outline of Trump’s approach to foreign policy examining his core beliefs regarding US military posture and interventions, alliances and free trade arrangements. It then examines its potential ramifications for US policies toward Russia and NATO, in the Middle East and in East Asia. The larger question that underlines this analysis is whether the Trump Presidency will reshape and strengthen, or instead weaken and degrade, American primacy in world politics.

A GENERAL OUTLINE OF TRUMP’S APPROACH TO FOREIGN POLICY

The set of core beliefs regarding foreign policy that seems to emerge from Trump’s statements and interviews, and from those of some of his close advisers, can be synthesized as follows.

First, the US should advance “peace through strength”, an axiom famously endorsed by Ronald Reagan.¹¹ This axiom rests on the idea that the US military has been degraded and needs to be

¹ Sarah Rainsford, “[US Election 2016: Why Russia Is Celebrating Trump Win](#),” BBC News, 9 November 2016.

² “[Turkey’s Erdogan Congratulates Trump After US Strains](#),” AFP, 10 November 2016.

³ Simon Denyer, “[Philippines’ Duterte Says He and Trump are ‘Alike’ At Least In Their Coarse Language](#),” The Washington Post, 10 November 2016.

⁴ Brinley Bruton and Carlo Angerer, “[Trump Victory: Le Pen, Farage, Orban Congratulate Fellow Populist](#),” NBC News, 9 November 2016.

⁵ Sarah Rainsford, 2016, *op. cit.*

⁶ Jules Pecnard, “[Elections américaines: Marine Le Pen célèbre la victoire de Trump sur la BBC](#),” L’Express, 13 November 2016.

⁷ “[Élection 2016: Pour Hollande, la victoire de Trump ‘ouvre une période d’incertitude’](#),” Le Monde, 9 November 2016.

⁸ “[German Minister Says Trump Gains a ‘Huge Shock’, Wants Clarity on NATO](#),” Reuters, 9 November 2016.

⁹ Elizabeth Shim, “[Emergency Meetings Held In Seoul After Donald Trump Wins U.S. Presidency](#),” UPI, 9 November 2016.

¹⁰ Ian Bremmer, “[Donald Trump’s Foreign Policy Is a Black Box](#),” Time, 9 November 2016.

¹¹ Peter Navarro, “[The Trump Doctrine: Peace Through Strength](#),” The National Interest, 31 March 2016.

rebuilt through major defense spending and investment in capabilities, including in the Navy (Trump wants to expand the current fleet from 274 ships to 350 ships).¹² This entails expanding the US conventional capabilities but also, potentially, upgrading its nuclear stockpile.¹³ President-elect Trump has also stressed the need to fully repeal the defense sequester, to increase the size of the U.S. Army to 540,000 active duty soldiers, to provide the U.S. Air Force with 1,200 fighter aircraft, to grow the U.S. Marine Corps to 36 battalions, to expand cyber warfare capabilities, and to invest in its missile defense system.¹⁴ This could include a radar site on the East Coast and, potentially, an East Coast ballistic missile defense site.¹⁵

Second, Trump appears to want to abandon large-scale military interventions (like Iraq and Afghanistan) and any ambition of “nation building” – even though the veracity of his opposition to the war in Iraq is hotly debated.¹⁶ In his words, “our current strategy of nation-building and regime change is a proven failure [...]. We are getting out of the business of nation building”.¹⁷ If (and only if) this argument translates into actual policy during his Presidency, the US could exhibit restraint in the decision to engage (or not) in large-scale military operations.

Third, Trump departs significantly from previous administrations with regards to his statements on the alliance system upon which American military preeminence has relied since the early Cold War. While some analysts portray him as being opposed to alliances,¹⁸ it could be argued that President-elect Donald Trump is not opposed to the US alliance system *itself*. What he fiercely criticizes is the alleged imbalance in the financial contribution of the US and its allies to these alliances. As he puts it, “I’m going to renegotiate some of our military costs”,¹⁹ because “we defend Japan. We defend Germany. We defend South Korea. We defend Saudi Arabia. We defend countries. They do not pay us what they should be paying us because we are providing a tremendous service and we’re losing a fortune”.²⁰ From his experience in real estate, also outlined in his book *The Art of the Deal*,²¹ he seems to have derived a “transactional approach” to domestic and international politics.²²

From this perspective, threatening to withdraw from an alliance can be seen as a bargaining chip to obtain greater financial commitment by US allies, as opposed to an expression of disdain for alliances themselves. In fact, successive US administrations have criticized the lack of substantial contribution of US allies and their “free-riding” behavior.²³ However, the tone of

¹² David B. Larter, [“Donald Trump Wants To Start the Biggest Navy Build-Up In Decades,”](#) *Navy Times*, 15 November 2016.

¹³ Donald Trump has expressed (on Twitter) his willingness to “greatly strengthen and expand [US] nuclear capability” – thereby creating some concern among arms control advocates. Rebecca Kheel, [“Trump Alarms Arms-Control Community with Nuke Tweet,”](#) *The Hill*, 22 December 2016. According to an article by the Arms Control Association, deciphering the actual meaning and intent of this statement is a “difficult task” given that, in their words, Trump’s comments “might simply be an expression of support for current U.S. efforts to maintain, upgrade, and replace U.S. nuclear forces. [...] Alternatively, Trump might be signaling his support for expanding the number of nuclear weapons in the U.S. nuclear inventory, building new types of nuclear weapons, and/or increasing the role nuclear weapons play in U.S. policy”. Daryl Kimball and Kingston Reif, [“Trump Tweet Could Signal Dangerous Nuclear Policy Shift,”](#) *Arms Control Now*, 22 December 2016.

¹⁴ See [“Full text: Donald Trump’s Speech on Fighting Terrorism,”](#) *Politico*, 15 August 2016; and [“National Defense”](#) in “Donald J. Trump’s Vision”.

¹⁵ Christopher P. Cavas and Joe Gould, [“Top Trump Military Advisers Detail GOP Candidate’s Defense Plan,”](#) *Defense News*, 30 October 2016.

¹⁶ Eugene Kiely, [“Donald Trump and the Iraq War,”](#) *FactCheck.org*, 19 February 2016; David A. Graham, [“Trump Was For Invading Libya \(and Iraq\) Before He Was Against It,”](#) *Defense One*, 6 June 2016.

¹⁷ Sopan Deb, [“Trump’s Foreign Policy Speech: No Details, a Few Ideas,”](#) *CBS News*, 27 April 2016.

¹⁸ Daniel Benaim, [“What Donald Trump Doesn’t Get About Alliances,”](#) *New Republic*, 28 March 2016.

¹⁹ [“Donald Trump on Foreign Policy,”](#) *OnTheIssues*, 2 July 2000.

²⁰ Elise Hu, [“Japan And South Korea Rattled By Trump’s Talk Of Closing U.S. Bases,”](#) *Parallels*, 10 November 2016.

²¹ Donald Trump, *Trump: The Art of the Deal*, Random House, 1987.

²² Matthew Fay, [“Trump’s Transactional Foreign Policy,”](#) *Niskanen Center*, 4 November 2016.

²³ See, for instance, Barack Obama’s 2016 interview in Jeffrey Goldberg, [“The Obama Doctrine,”](#) *The Atlantic*, April 2016; and [“Transcript of Secretary of Defense Robert Gates’ Speech on NATO’s future,”](#) *The Wall Street Journal*, 10 June 2011.

Trump's critiques and the substance of his threats reach an unprecedented scale – with explicit threats to withdraw from alliances, remove troops from allied countries or accept the development of nuclear weapons by US allies, which we shall explore in more detail in the next section. Furthermore, Trump does not seem to be concerned by the second and third-order effects of these threats on the credibility of the US commitment to individual alliances and to the overall alliance system. When the credibility of a state's commitment to an alliance is weakened, this can deteriorate the deterrent function of that alliance and thereby embolden rivals to adopt more assertive or aggressive behavior.

Finally, contrary to most of his Republicans predecessors, Trump is fiercely critical of free trade agreements. This is why he has pledged, within his first 100 days in office, to announce his intention to renegotiate the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) with Canada and Mexico or to withdraw from it, as well as to announce US withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) with 11 Pacific Rim nations replacing it with "fair bilateral trade deals".²⁴ The withdrawal from the TPP, that President-elect Trump has defined as a "disaster",²⁵ would provide a significant blow to the Obama's administration so-called "pivot" to Asia, removing a central economic leg of this foreign policy undertaking (discussed below). Questions have also been raised about the future of the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) with the EU.²⁶ A study by The Peterson Institute for International Economics (PIIE) estimated the consequences of Trump's most likely trade policies on job creation in the US under three scenarios, ranging from "aborted trade war" to a "full trade war" with Mexico and China.²⁷ The first scenario hypothesizes that Trump would be forced to lower tariffs within a year of imposing them. This, according to the PIIE, could result in the disruption of global supply chains and the loss of 1.3 million jobs in the US private sector. A "full trade war" scenario, on the other hand, would result in 4.8 million American job losses with adverse consequences also for the services sector.

Given this set of core beliefs, two of the key pillars of post-World War II US foreign policy could be potentially weakened under the Trump presidency, namely international free trade institutions and agreements and the network of US bilateral and multilateral alliances.

WHAT TRAJECTORY FOR TRUMP'S FOREIGN POLICY?

The question therefore arises of the potential ramifications of this set of beliefs for the trajectory of US foreign policy under Trump's presidency, especially in relation to his policies toward Russia, NATO, the Middle East and East Asia.

²⁴ James Masters, "[Donald Trump's First 100 days: A Breakdown of His Plan](#)," CNN, 22 November 2016; Deroy Murdock, "[Trump's Gettysburg Address Overflows with Conservative Ideas](#)," National Review, 26 October 2016.

²⁵ David Weber, "[Trump: TPP Not Dead After President-elect's Victory — Just In Suspended Animation, Advocate Says](#)," ABC News, 11 November 2016.

²⁶ James Moore, "[What President Trump's Victory Means for the Most Important Trade Deal in the World](#)," The Independent, 9 November 2016.

²⁷ Marcus Noland, Gary Clyde Hufbauer et al., "[Assessing Trade Agendas in the US Presidential Campaign](#)," PIIE, September 2016.

US-Russia Relations

President-elect Trump has consistently stressed his eagerness to improve relations with Russia.²⁸ He stated, for instance, that Crimea's people are happier under Russian than under Ukrainian rule, that he "would be looking at" recognizing Crimea as Russian territory,²⁹ and offered to join forces with Russia to fight the Islamic State (IS).³⁰ At the same time, he stressed that "easing of tensions, and improved relations with Russia" are possible only "from a position of strength", reiterating one of his core beliefs.³¹ Furthermore, the Trump campaign team pushed for, and obtained, the removal from the Republican platform of any reference to the delivery of weapons to Ukraine to fight Russian and rebel forces.³² The Kremlin has reciprocated these gestures stressing that Putin and Trump "set out the same main foreign policy principles" and that their foreign policy approaches are "phenomenally close".³³ Allegations have been made regarding ties, or collusion, between Trump and the Kremlin, including that the cyber-attacks on the Democratic National Convention were orchestrated by Moscow in response to Trump's call for a cyber-attack on Clinton's emails.³⁴ Specifically, the CIA and the FBI agreed on their assessment that Russia's cyber-attacks were aimed at helping Donald Trump win the presidency rather than just at undermining confidence in the US electoral system.³⁵ Once Trump was elected, Russian government officials immediately began conferring with members of his campaign team to "consider ways of building dialogue with the future Donald Trump administration and channels we will be using for those purposes".³⁶ The combination of these indicators strongly points in the direction of a strengthening of US-Russia relations under the Trump presidency, which would have significant ramifications for both US-NATO relations and US policy in the Middle East.

US-NATO Relations

Trump's "transactional" approach to international politics has been in full display vis-à-vis NATO. He has consistently stressed that the US commitment to NATO's article 5 (collective defense) will be conditioned upon whether European members stop "free-riding" and provide a greater financial contribution to the Alliance. In his words, the US is spending "billions and billions of dollars on NATO. [...] We're paying too much. You have countries in NATO [...] that are getting a free ride and it's unfair, it's very unfair".³⁷ Asked whether the members of NATO could count on the United States to come to their military aid if they were attacked by Russia, he responded "if they fulfill their obligations to us, the answer is yes [but] right now there are many coun-

²⁸ Joshua Tucker, "[Here's How Trump's Election Will Affect U.S.-Russian Relations](#)," *The Washington Post*, 10 November 2016.

²⁹ Alexander Mallin, "[Trump: Crimea's People Prefer Russia, But If He's Elected Putin Is 'Not Going Into Ukraine'](#)," *ABC News*, 31 July 2016.

³⁰ "[Donald Trump Would Consider Alliance with Russia's Vladimir Putin Against Isis](#)," *Reuters*, 26 July 2016.

³¹ Fred Pleitgen, "[Donald Trump's Foreign Policy Speech Earns Praise in Russia](#)," *CNN Politics*, 29 April 2016.

³² The reference to the provision of "lethal defensive weapons" to Ukraine was replaced with "appropriate assistance". Josh Rogin, "[Trump Campaign Guts GOP's Anti-Russia Stance on Ukraine](#)," *The Washington Post*, 18 July 2016.

³³ Andrew Osborn, "[Donald Trump's Foreign Policy 'Almost Exactly the Same as Putin'. Kremlin Says](#)," *The Independent*, 10 November 2016.

³⁴ Ashley Parker and David E. Sanger, "[Donald Trump Calls on Russia to Find Hillary Clinton's Missing Emails](#)," *The New York Times*, 27 July 2016.

³⁵ Adam Entous and Ellen Nakashima, "[FBI in Agreement with CIA that Russia Aimed to Help Trump Win White House](#)," *The Washington Post*, 16 December 2016. On the more cautious assessment of the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, see Mark Hosenball and Jonathan Landay, "[Exclusive: Top U.S. Spy Agency Has Not Embraced CIA Assessment on Russia Hacking – Sources](#)," *Reuters*, 13 December 2016.

³⁶ David Filipov and Andrew Roth, "[Moscow Had Contacts with Trump Team During Campaign, Russian Diplomat Says](#)," *The Washington Post*, 10 November 2016.

³⁷ "[Charlie Sykes Interviews Donald Trump on 620](#)," *WJTM*, 28 March 2016.

tries that have not fulfilled their obligations to us".³⁸ For Trump, if the US "cannot be properly reimbursed for the tremendous cost of our military protecting other countries [...] then yes, I would be absolutely prepared to tell those countries, 'Congratulations, you will be defending yourself'".³⁹

Under the Trump presidency, because of possible renegotiations of intra-Alliance burden sharing, the perceived credibility of US commitment to article 5 could be weakened in the eyes of US allies and rivals. Multiple, and not necessarily mutually exclusive, potential outcomes could emerge from this dynamic. First, the combination of a weakened NATO's article 5 and of a potential "rapprochement" between Washington and Moscow would alarm several states both in Eastern Europe and in the Baltic region. This might lead them to jointly exert pressure on the US to restrain the strengthening of ties with Russia and, possibly, to reconsider (at least marginally) their traditional skepticism vis-à-vis European integration in the defense realm. Secondly, the EU's threefold challenge of an assertive Russia, Brexit and a US president willing to use the alliance's credibility as a bargaining tool could spur efforts and concrete steps aimed at developing and strengthening EU defense policy.⁴⁰ Finally, a perceived weakened deterrent vis-à-vis Moscow might potentially stoke anti-Russian nationalism in the Baltic states which could provide a pretext for Putin to undertake (or expand) actions aimed at destabilizing domestic politics in the Baltic states (through economic pressure, information warfare, covert political sabotage, etc.) and weakening NATO's cohesion. Overall, US-Russia relations might be strengthened under the Trump's presidency, but this could well create cracks within NATO, reduce the credibility of article 5 and partially alter the position of some European states on the relative balance between NATO and European defense.

US Foreign Policy in the Middle East

US & Russia in Syria

The strengthening of US relations with Russia would also have implications in the Middle East, most notably in the fight against IS. Trump repeatedly stated, unconvincingly, that he has a "secret plan" to defeat IS but refuses to reveal specifics to avoid providing information to ISIS.⁴¹ The contours of Trump's strategy to defeat IS are therefore vague besides generic references to his will to "bomb the hell out of [the Islamic State]"⁴² and to conduct activities considered as war crimes under international humanitarian law such as torture⁴³ and killing the family members of terrorists.⁴⁴

Jeff Sessions, a close adviser to Trump during the campaign then nominated for the position of Attorney General, provided few specifics stating that "Trump's first commitment militarily is the destruction of [the Islamic State]" – which he considers a "direct threat to the United States",

³⁸ David E. Sanger and Maggie Haberman, "[Transcript: Donald Trump on NATO, Turkey's Coup Attempt and the World](#)," *The New York Times*, 21 July 2016.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ "[Après le Brexit, Trump force l'UE à revoir sa défense](#)," *EurActiv.fr/AFP*, 15 November 2016; "[German Defence Minister Wants EU Military to Match NATO](#)," *Reuters*, 7 November 2016.

⁴¹ Susan Jones, "[Donald Trump Says He Knows What to Do About ISIS, But I'm Not Going to Tell You](#)," *CNS News*, 28 May 2015.

⁴² Jenna Johnson, "[Donald Trump Promises to 'Bomb the Hell Out of ISIS' in New Radio Ad](#)," *The Washington Post*, 18 November 2015.

⁴³ Ben Jacobs, "[Donald Trump Renews Support for Waterboarding at Ohio Rally: 'I Like It a Lot'](#)," *The Guardian*, 29 June 2016.

⁴⁴ Hardeep Matharu, "[Donald Trump Reiterates Desire to Murder Terrorists' Families](#)," *The Independent*, 4 March 2016.

adding that Trump “would have his military produce a plan within 30 days. It would involve military action, cyber, financial, ideological and diplomatic efforts to focus on the destruction” of IS.⁴⁵ Also, Walid Phares, a close foreign policy advisor on the Middle East to Donald Trump, said that the President-elect aims to enhance cooperation with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Jordan and Egypt to support counter-terrorism efforts in Syria.⁴⁶

Trump has repeatedly advocated for more US-Russia cooperation in fighting the Islamic State (IS).⁴⁷ He also stated that defeating IS is a higher priority than persuading Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to step down.⁴⁸ In response, the latter has said he is “ready” to cooperate with the US.⁴⁹ Accordingly, this might allow for some form of enhanced cooperation between the US and Russia, and potentially between the three countries, in the fight against the Islamic State. However, the scope and the modalities of US-Russia cooperation in the fight against IS remain ill-defined. One possibility could be the (re)activation of the Joint Implementing Group (JIG).⁵⁰ JIG, which was to be established in Jordan, was negotiated in July 2016 to coordinate US and Russian intelligence and air attacks against agreed targets, including both IS and Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (formerly Jabhat al-Nusra). It was never implemented, however, because of the failure of the cessation of hostilities and the subsequent breakdown in US-Russian cooperation in Syria.⁵¹

Trump & Iran

Besides US policies vis-à-vis IS, Trump has consistently criticized Barack Obama’s nuclear deal with Iran, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). He told the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) that “my number-one priority is to dismantle the disastrous deal with Iran”; he also said to different audiences that he would “renegotiate” the agreement – although his aides said that he would simply seek to refine it.⁵² Furthermore, Trump called for doubling and tripling the sanctions previously imposed on Iran in order to obtain more concessions – without going into further detail.⁵³

However, renegotiating the deal would prove extremely difficult, if not unrealistic, given that it would require persuading the other five signatories (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom and Germany) to renegotiate an agreement which took years to develop. Dismantling the deal, on the other hand, would be potentially feasible in that it would entail working with the Republican-led Congress to impose new sanctions. According to Walid Phares, the President-elect “will take the agreement, review it, send it to Congress, demand from Iranians to restore a few issues or change a few issues. And there will be a discussion. It could be a tense discussion”.⁵⁴ However, doing so could put the US in violation of the Security Council resolution (2231) endor-

⁴⁵ Christopher P. Cava and Joe Gould, op. cit.

⁴⁶ “[US President-Elect Plans Coalition with GCC, Jordan and Egypt to Fight Terror](#),” Arab News, 12 November 2016.

⁴⁷ Rami G. Khouri, “[What Will Trump Do on Syria?](#),” Aljazeera, 11 November 2016.

⁴⁸ Steve Holland, “[Trump Says He Would Consider Alliance with Russia Over Islamic State](#),” Reuters, 25 July 2016.

⁴⁹ Bethan McKernan, “[President Assad: Syria Is Ready to Co-operate with Donald Trump](#),” The Independent, 10 November 2016.

⁵⁰ See the document “[Terms of Reference for the Joint Implementation Group](#)”.

⁵¹ US Department of State, “[Suspension of Participation in Bilateral Channels with Russia Established to Sustain the Cessation of Hostilities in Syria](#),” Press Statement, 3 October 2016.

⁵² Justin Fishel, “[Could Donald Trump Really Dismantle the Iran Nuclear Deal?](#),” ABC News, 14 November 2016.

⁵³ *Ibid.* In early December 2016, the U.S. Senate passed a 10-year extension of sanctions against Iran on Thursday. Patricia Zengerle, “[Extension of Iran Sanctions Act Passes U.S. Congress](#),” Reuters, 1 December 2016.

⁵⁴ Tracy Wilkinson, “[Trump’s Plans to Scuttle or Amend the Iran Nuclear Deal Remain a Work in Progress](#),” Los Angeles Times, 14 November 2016.

sing the JCPOA. Moreover, it could lead Iran to disregard its obligations under the JCPOA, thereby causing friction in US-Iran relations and, potentially, enhancing the possibility of resorting to military options against Iran by the US or Israel.

Coupled with enhanced cooperation with Russia in Syria and growing friction with Iran (added to possible tensions with Saudi Arabia over alliance burden-sharing and oil),⁵⁵ other features of Trump's foreign policy in the Middle East potentially include closer and friendlier ties with Turkey,⁵⁶ Egypt⁵⁷ and Israel than under President Obama. With Israel, in particular, Trump has called Jerusalem "the eternal capital" of Israel and said he was "100 percent for" moving the embassy there⁵⁸ – even though he formally stressed his neutrality regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.⁵⁹ David Friedman, Trump's pick for US Ambassador to Israel, added that Trump does not believe recognising Palestine is "an American imperative".⁶⁰ Strong and cooperative relations between Israel and the US, as well as a stalemate in the negotiations process, could be expected amidst growing tensions with Iran. Overall, what could emerge is a reshuffling of the cooperative and competitive dynamics in US relations with the key regional players in the Middle East compared to the Obama presidency.

US Foreign Policy in East Asia

The Pivot to Asia is Dead, Long Live the Pivot?

Many analysts have claimed that Barack Obama's so-called "pivot" (later relabelled "rebalance") to Asia is dead,⁶¹ either because of lack of commitment and military resources, or because of the necessity to "re-pivot" to other regions, including Europe and the Middle East.⁶² Instead, the pivot to Asia is a steadily evolving adaptation of US foreign policy attention, priorities and resources to the shifting center of strategic and economic gravity of international politics from the Euro-Atlantic area to the Asia-Pacific.⁶³ The region hosts 60% of the world's population, produces close to 40% of global GDP, includes many of the world's fastest growing economies and is a critical hub of global supply chains.⁶⁴ In other words, this foreign policy undertaking is a response to longer-term dynamics than a mere focus on discrete crises might suggest. Indeed, the key challenges and opportunities for the sustainment, or the decline, of American primacy in world politics lie in East Asia.

The label "rebalance" could be described as a "retcon" (short for "retroactive continuity"), an ex post coherent rationale for a range of initiatives, many of which preceded the Obama admis-

⁵⁵ Chris Keane, "[Saudi Arabia Warns Trump Against Stopping Imports of its Oil](#)," *Reuters*, 16 November 2016; Maria Abi-Habib, "[Trump Victory Causes 'Serious Concerns' in Middle East](#)," *The Wall Street Journal*, 9 November 2016.

⁵⁶ Burak Ege Bekdil, "[Cautious Optimism in Turkey After Trump Wins US Presidential Election](#)," *Defense News*, 9 November 2016.

⁵⁷ Cristiano Lima, "[Trump Praises Egypt's al-Sisi: 'He's a Fantastic Guy'](#)," *Politico*, 22 September 2016.

⁵⁸ Arwa Ibrahim, "[Trump in the White House: The Man Advising Him on the Middle East](#)," *Middle East Eye*, 15 November 2016.

⁵⁹ Brian Schaefer, "[Where Does Donald Trump Stand on Israel?](#)," *Haaretz*, 10 November 2016.

⁶⁰ Barak Ravid, "[David Friedman: Trump Would Support Israeli Annexation of Parts of West Bank](#)," *Haaretz*, 16 December 2016. On Friedman's views regarding the Israeli-Palestine conflict, see "[Joint Statement from Jason Dov Greenblatt and David Friedman, Co-Chairmen of the Israel Advisory Committee to Donald J. Trump](#)".

⁶¹ Peter Lee, "[The US Pivot To Asia: Death by Trump](#)," *Asia Times*, 13 November 2016; Bob Dreyfuss, "[Is DoD's Asia 'Pivot' Dead?](#)," *The Nation*, 7 March 2013.

⁶² Martin S. Indyk, "[The Re-Pivot](#)," *Brookings*, 20 November 2012.

⁶³ Aaron Friedberg, 2014, "Asia Emerges as Center of Gravity in the International System," *American Enterprise Institute*, 25 October; Danny Quah, "The Global Economy's Shifting Centre of Gravity," *Global Policy*, 2:1, 2011, pp. 1-7.

⁶⁴ Brock Williams et. Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), *Countries: Comparative Trade and Economic Analysis*, Congressional Research Service, 2013.

nistration.⁶⁵ As such, Obama's "rebalance", which relies on the linkage of diplomatic, military and economic dimensions, combines elements of both continuity and discontinuity with regard to previous administrations. On the one hand, it builds upon longstanding US diplomatic, military and economic presence in East Asia aimed at maintaining a favorable regional balance of power and at furthering American economic interests through trade and investment. On the other, its elements of discontinuity compared to previous administrations include a larger and more coordinated bureaucratic effort aimed at adopting a coherent and durable approach to the region, a greater focus on Southeast Asia, and more emphasis on economic diplomacy and multilateral institutions, among others. In other words, Obama's rebalance to Asia is characterized more by cumulative evolution than by a radical departure from previous administrations' policies in the region. The extent to which Trump's policies in East Asia, most likely under a new name, will mark a rupture should be assessed in this context.

Two advisers to Trump on Trump's policy in East Asia.⁶⁶ "We are going to have a Pacific pivot. That may not be the best word anymore, but in general that concept of a strengthened position in the Pacific" is supported by Trump's team. They added that "you simply cannot look at a section of the world where we have probably two-thirds of all of the trade in the world going through there for the next 10 years, where we have major navies and major armies in the world focused on that".⁶⁷ The US focus on East Asia is unlikely to decrease in intensity, but the modalities of its engagement with specific countries might well be altered.

US-China Relations

While Trump has not expressed strong positions on the South China Sea during the presidential race, he has defined China as the "biggest long-term challenge" for the US.⁶⁸ He also described China as one of the US' main adversaries,⁶⁹ adding that he would engage in a military buildup in the region,⁷⁰ label China a currency manipulator,⁷¹ and impose a 45% tariff on Chinese exports.⁷² Furthermore, President-elect Trump has sparked controversies regarding his position vis-à-vis Taiwan (the Republic of China, ROC). He spoke with the president of Taiwan, Tsai Ing-wen, who congratulated him on winning the elections.⁷³ This was the first known contact between a US president or president-elect with a Taiwanese leader since before the US broke diplomatic relations with the ROC in 1979. During the phone call, Tsai and Trump stressed the close economic, political, and security ties between Taiwan and the United States and discussed about "strengthening bilateral relations".⁷⁴ In doing so, Donald Trump raised questions and doubts on

⁶⁵ Retcon is a literary device used to insert "new revelations" in a storyline that also explain everything that occurred previously. Benjamin Jensen, Eric Shibuya, "The Military Rebalance as Retcon," in Hugo Meijer, *Origins and Evolution of the US Rebalance toward Asia: Diplomatic, Military, and Economic Dimensions* (dir), Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

⁶⁶ Alexander Gray and Peter Navarro, "Donald Trump's Peace Through Strength Vision for the Asia-Pacific," *Foreign Policy*, 7 November 2016.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ "Donald Trump on China," *OnTheIssues*, 2 July 2002.

⁶⁹ Alexander Gray and Peter Navarro, *op. cit.*

⁷⁰ Katharine Murphy, "[Malcolm Turnbull Welcomes Trump Plans for Military Buildup in Asia-Pacific](#)," *The Guardian*, 16 November 2016.

⁷¹ Damian Paletta, "[Donald Trump Upends Status Quo on Foreign Policy](#)," *The Wall Street Journal*, 8 March 2016.

⁷² Maggie Haberman, "[Donald Trump Says He Favors Big Tariffs on Chinese Exports](#)," *The New York Times*, 7 January 2016.

⁷³ Jackie Northam, "[Trump's Phone Call To Taiwan's Leader Risks China Tensions](#)," *NPR*, 5 December 2016.

⁷⁴ Alex Lockie and Natasha Bertrand, "[Trump Likely Just Infuriated China with the US's First Call to Taiwan Since 1979](#)," *Business Insider*, 2 December 2016; Amy B. Wang, Emily Rauhala and William Wan, "[Why People Are Making Such a Big Deal About the Trump-Taiwan Call](#)," *The Washington Post*, 5 December 2016.

whether he will abide by the so-called “One China” policy and, therefore, on the future stability of the US-China relationship.

Since President Nixon’s trip to mainland China (the People’s Republic of China, PRC) in 1972 and the US-PRC rapprochement in the 1970s, how to handle Taiwan, the self-governing island that the PRC considers part of China, has been the most sensitive issue in the US-China relationship. The Taiwan issue is perceived by the leadership in Beijing as a core interest of the PRC, a matter of territorial integrity and internal affairs.⁷⁵ As stressed by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “regarding China’s sovereignty and territorial integrity of Taiwan, we absolutely do not tolerate any foreign powers’ conduct that damages China’s core interests”.⁷⁶ This central and highly sensitive feature of the US-China relationship has been managed through three carefully negotiated joint communiqés (1972, 1978, 1982) and, on the US side, also by the Taiwan Relations Act passed by Congress in 1979. These three communiqés lay the basis of the US-China relationship and of the handling of the Taiwan issue therein.

- In the **1972 Joint Commiqué** (Shanghai commiqué), the US acknowledges that “all the Chinese on either side of the Taiwan Strait maintain that there is but one China and that Taiwan is a part of China” and that the United States does “not challenge that position”.⁷⁷

- The **1978 Joint Commiqué** (normalization commiqué), that established US-PRC diplomatic relations (starting on 1 January 1979), affirms that the US would recognize the People’s Republic of China as the sole legal government of China, and that the US would maintain cultural, commercial and other unofficial ties with Taiwan acknowledging “the Chinese position that there is but one China and Taiwan is part of China”.⁷⁸ In establishing diplomatic relations with the PRC, the United States agreed that it would break off formal ties with Taiwan.

- In the **1982 Joint Commiqué** (on arms sales) the US “reiterated that it has no intention of infringing on Chinese sovereignty and territorial integrity, or interfering in China’s internal affairs, or pursuing a policy of ‘two China’ or ‘One China, One Taiwan’”.⁷⁹

- Finally, the **Taiwan Relations Act** (TRA) passed by Congress in March 1979 was aimed at reassuring Taiwan after the establishment of US-PRC diplomatic relations on January of that year. It stresses that “the US decision to establish diplomatic relations with the PRC rests upon the expectations that the future of Taiwan will be determined by peaceful means”, adding that the US would consider “any effort to determine the nature of Taiwan by other than peaceful means [...] a threat to the peace of the Western Pacific area and of grave concern to the United States”.⁸⁰

⁷⁵ Caitlin Campbell et al., “China’s Core Interests and the East China Sea,” US-China China Economic and Security Review Commission, Staff Researcher Backgrounder, 10 May 2013.

⁷⁶ “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Kong Quan Warns the U.S. for its Decision to Sell Taiwan the Long-Range Radar System and Answers a Reporter’s Question” (translation), *People’s Republic of China Foreign Ministry*, 1 January 2004 (quoted in Campbell et al., 2013, *op. cit.*).

⁷⁷ “Joint Commiqué between the People’s Republic of China and the United States of America,” 27 February 1972.

⁷⁸ “Joint Commiqué on the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations between the United States of American and the People’s Republic of China”, 16 December 1978.

⁷⁹ The commiqué also established the principles governing US arms sales to Taiwan, stressing that the US would not carry out a long-term policy of arms sales to Taipei, that its arms sales would not exceed, either in qualitative or quantitative terms, the level of those supplied since 1979, and that it would gradually reduce its sales of arms to the island “leading over a period of time to a final resolution”. “United States-China Joint Commiqué on United States Arms Sales to Taiwan,” 17 August 1982.

⁸⁰ US Congress, Taiwan Relations Act, P.L. 96-98, 10 April 1979.

By discussing on the phone with the Taiwanese president and through his subsequent remarks on the “One China” policy, Trump appeared to question a (if not the) central tenet of the US-China relationship since the 1970s.⁸¹ He stated on *Fox News*, “I fully understand the ‘one China’ policy, but I don’t know why we have to be bound by a ‘one China’ policy unless we make a deal with China having to do with other things, including trade”.⁸² Such actions and statements have caused “serious” concerns in Beijing.⁸³ The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs urged Trump “to fully recognise the sensitivity of the Taiwan question [and] to properly deal with Taiwan-related matters in a prudent manner so as not to disrupt or damage the overall interests of the bilateral relationship”, describing the “One China” policy as the “political bedrock” of ties between the two countries.⁸⁴ Whether Donald Trump’s actions and statements signal a fundamental shift from the central tenet of US foreign policy toward China since the 1970s or, instead, his willingness to use Taiwan as a bargaining chip to obtain concessions from Beijing remains disputed.⁸⁵ Nonetheless, China’s past reactions vis-à-vis perceived changes from the status quo on Taiwan demonstrate the sensitivity of this issue. In 1995, in response to an unprecedented invitation to Taiwan’s president to speak at Cornell University, the PRC launched several military exercises in the Taiwan Straits and fired ballistic missiles into the water close to the island to intimidate Taipei in the run-up to the presidential election. The US reacted by sailing two aircraft carrier groups to the area to demonstrate its commitment to regional stability.⁸⁶ Given China’s perception of Taiwan as an issue of internal affairs and territorial integrity, a move away from the “One China” policy from Donald Trump is likely to generate major frictions in the US-China relationship.

Furthermore, the overall bilateral relationship is characterized by a mixture of strategic rivalry and interdependence and, consequently, by elements of both cooperation and competition. The Obama administration, in a sector-by-sector approach, sought to manage the areas of friction in the bilateral relationship (e.g. military modernization, cyber-espionage, intellectual property theft, etc.) while seeking to expand the areas of potential cooperation (climate change, nuclear security, peacekeeping etc.).⁸⁷ Furthermore, one of the considerations in the making of Obama’s “China policy” has been how to strengthen and diversify US military presence, alliances and partnerships in Asia while avoiding the risk of fuelling the perception in Beijing that this policy was aimed at containing China.⁸⁸ Given Trump’s stated core beliefs on China, and his apparent willingness to reconsider US policy toward Taiwan (or at least to use it as a bargaining chip vis-à-vis Beijing), under his presidency tensions might emerge in a broader range of areas in the bilateral diplomatic agenda than under his predecessor, including in the trade domain, while the areas of potential cooperation could shrink. Furthermore, the US might be less attentive to the impact of its military presence (or buildup) in the region on the perceptions of Chinese leaders regarding an alleged containment strategy – creating the potential for greater assertiveness in US-China relations.

⁸¹ “[Taiwan Fears Becoming Donald Trump’s Bargaining Chip](#),” *The Economist*, 17 December 2016.

⁸² Caren Bohan and David Brunnstrom, “[Trump Says U.S. not Necessarily Bound by ‘One China’ Policy](#),” *Reuters*, 12 December 2016.

⁸³ Tom Phillips, “[China ‘Seriously Concerned’ After Trump Questions Taiwan policy](#),” *The Guardian*, 12 December 2016.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ “[Taiwan Fears Becoming Donald Trump’s Bargaining Chip](#),” *The Economist*, 17 December 2016.

⁸⁶ Robert Ross, “The 1995-1996 Taiwan Strait Confrontation: Coercion, Credibility, and the Use of Force,” *International Security*, 25:2, 2000, pp. 87-123.

⁸⁷ See “[U.S.-China Strategic & Economic Dialogue Outcomes of the Strategic Track](#),” US Department of State, available at.

⁸⁸ Hugo Meijer, “The Reconfiguration of American Primacy in World Politics: Prospects and Challenges for the US Rebalance to Asia,” in Hugo Meijer (ed) *Origins and Evolution of the US Rebalance toward Asia: Diplomatic, Military, and Economic Dimensions* (dir), Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

Some of Donald Trump's statements have also shed doubts on the future of US alliances with Japan and South Korea that have formed the backbone of US presence in East Asia since the end of World War II. He has stressed the need for Tokyo and Seoul to increase their contribution to the alliance⁸⁹ (even though in addition to funding their own military, they cover 75% and 50% of the costs of stationing US military troops on their soil respectively).⁹⁰ He also stated that if Tokyo and Seoul do not increase their contribution to their alliance with Washington, the US could withdraw its troops from the two countries,⁹¹ and he would be open to accept Japan and South Korea developing nuclear weapons because "there is going to be a point at which we just can't do this anymore [protecting South Korea and Japan]. [...] We cannot afford to be the military and the police for the world".⁹² Even though these threats were merely bargaining chips used to increase the negotiating leverage to obtain greater financial contribution, they have the potential – just like in NATO – of weakening the credibility of US commitment and, therefore, the deterrent capacity of the alliance. This, in turn, could lead China to adopt more assertive behaviour to test the limits of America's willingness to protect its allies.

As far as North Korea's nuclear program is concerned, Trump stated that he is willing to talk to North Korean leader Kim Jong-un (who endorsed him)⁹³ to try to stop Pyongyang's nuclear program, and that China should also help solve the problem.⁹⁴ Specifically, he has argued for the use of commercial pressures on China to persuade Beijing to rein in its North Korean ally and modify the trajectory of its nuclear program. In his words, China "say[s] they don't have that much control over North Korea. They have total control, because without China they wouldn't be able to eat. [...] China should solve that problem. And we should put pressure on China to solve the problem".⁹⁵ In his view, trade could be used as pressure point on China because "we have total control over China [...] We have China because of trade. [...] If they don't solve that problem, we should be very tough on them with trade".⁹⁶ Given the development of Pyongyang's nuclear and missiles programs, it is likely that Trump will face, within the next four years, a North Korea that has gained the capability to strike the US with nuclear weapons.⁹⁷ This development is already generating calls in the US to consider decisive action, potentially including military pre-emptive strikes. A report by the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) recently concluded that "to the extent that China declines to cooperate and North Korea continues to refuse to negotiate, the US will have no choice but to work with Japan and Korea to consider more assertive military and political actions, including those that directly threaten the existence of the North Korea regime and its nuclear and missile capabilities".⁹⁸ On the one hand, the closer Pyongyang is to having the nuclear and missile capabilities to strike the United States, the greater the pressure on Trump to take some form of military action. On the other hand, military strikes against North Korea

⁸⁹ "Trump Urges Japan to Pay More to Maintain U.S. Military Bases Here," *The Japan Times*, 5 May 2016.

⁹⁰ Yuka Koshino, "Q&A: How Much Do U.S. Military Bases in Japan and Korea Cost?," *The Wall Street Journal*, 28 April 2016.

⁹¹ "Trump Suggests Pulling Troops From Japan, Korea: Let Them Build Nukes," *Newsmax*, 28 March 2016.

⁹² Mark Makela, "Transcript: Donald Trump Expounds on His Foreign Policy Views," *The New York Times*, 26 March 2016.

⁹³ JH Ahn, "North Korea Praises Trump and Urges US Voters to Reject 'Dull Hillary,'" *The Guardian*, 1 June 2016.

⁹⁴ Steve Holland and Emily Flitter, "Exclusive: Trump Would Talk to North Korea's Kim, Wants to Renegotiate Climate Accord," *Reuters*, 18 May 2016.

⁹⁵ Stephen Evans, "How Might Donald Trump Deal with North Korea's Kim Jong-un?," *BBC News*, 11 November 2016.

⁹⁶ Tim Hains, "Donald Trump on North Korea: 'Without China They Wouldn't Be Able To Eat,' 'We Have Great Power Over China,'" *RealClearPolitics*, 7 January 2016.

⁹⁷ Bruce Blair, "Trump Could Face a Nuclear Decision Soon," *Politico*, 16 November 2016.

⁹⁸ Council on Foreign Relations, "A Sharper Choice on North Korea. Engaging China for a Stable Northeast Asia", 2016.

targets, even if limited, is likely to have unpredictable consequences in terms of reactions by North Korea and China thereby potentially fuelling, rather than containing, regional instability.

CONCLUSION

This paper has sought to provide, based on the available information, a general outline of Trump's approach to foreign policy looking at his core beliefs regarding military might and interventions, alliances and free trade arrangements. On this basis, it has sought to assess the potential trajectory of Trump's foreign policy vis-à-vis Russia and NATO, in the Middle East and in East Asia. The capacity of the US, under Trump's presidency, to respond to the security challenges in these regions, and to shape patterns of cooperation and competition therein, is likely to shape the future prospects of American primacy in world politics.