

What to Expect from the United States: A Look Ahead at US Foreign Policy

by Ian O. Lesser

ABSTRACT

The Trump presidency has brought an extraordinary measure of uncertainty to US international policy, from trade to security. The outcome of the 2020 elections may change a great deal, not least in terms of style. But there is a risk that key aspects of the Trump policy agenda may outlast his presidency. Even under a new administration, a “reset” may be hard to achieve as others international actors have adjusted their own policies. Structural shifts are also part of the equation, both domestically and internationally. In key respects, the Trump presidency has likely “given history a shove”, with troubling implications for global stability.

US foreign policy | Transatlantic relations | European Union | NATO

keywords

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Introduction

International attitudes toward the United States have always been driven to a considerable extent by views of the incumbent president. In this sense, style and personality matter. The effects are not always straightforward. George W. Bush (2001–9) struggled to overcome global, especially European perceptions of swagger and unilateralism in Washington, even as his administration pursued many more or less mainstream policies. Barack Obama (2009–17), by contrast, enjoyed the benefit of the doubt and generally positive attitudes worldwide, against a backdrop of allied disappointment in some key policy areas. The administration of Donald Trump has taken this phenomenon to new levels. There are many reasons for this. US's partners – and competitors – value predictability in Washington. President Trump's blunt and highly idiosyncratic style have underscored a new sense of US unpredictability. All of this has been accompanied by sharp differences over policy, from trade to security. Transatlantic partners sense that they have entered uncharted territory in relations with Washington. The impeachment proceedings now underway introduce an additional and potentially transforming variable into this already complex equation.

At the same time, there are strong, structural elements driving US foreign policy, and these go well beyond the vagaries of style and election outcomes. Some of these argue for continuity. Others predate the Trump presidency and presage significant shifts. Regardless of the outcome in 2020, US foreign policy could look substantially different two or four or eight years from now.¹ And this means that the international system as a whole could look substantially different. Even if a successor administration in Washington – or indeed a second Trump

¹ For a variety of perspectives on President Trump's foreign policy and a look to the future, see the series of articles in "Letting Go: Trump, America and the World", in *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 97, No. 2 (March/April 2018), p. 1-46.

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administration – wished to reset key relationships, this may prove difficult or impossible. Other powers have evolved and adjusted their policies. They may not see the value of a return to the status quo ante. By openly questioning some of the traditional tenets of US's approach to the world, President Trump has likely "given history a shove".

1. On the edge of the cliff?

The Trump administration has been extraordinarily lucky. It is rare for an administration to make it through three years in power without a major economic or security crisis. Apart from political crises, largely self-inflicted, this administration has not had to confront anything on the order of the 2008 financial collapse or the 9/11 attacks. Can this luck hold? Even the most vigorous opponents of the administration must hope so. But the prospects are highly uncertain. The January 2020 clashes with Iran and the ongoing brinkmanship with Tehran remind us of the risk. Relationships with powers such as China and Russia have slid from competition to barely contained confrontation. Regional conflicts involving the US are brewing in Asia and the Gulf, and possibly in places like Venezuela. The confluence of frictions over trade and geopolitics has further undermined international stability, and has arguably increased the risk of low probability-high consequence contingencies, above all with China. Alliances have frayed even as the security logic behind these relationships has become more obvious and compelling. Today, if Washington were to be confronted with crises of the kind faced by the Bush and Obama administrations, it is unclear that the same, essentially cooperative approach to crisis management would prevail. The instincts for this have weakened, and not just in the US.

2. Domestic dynamics

Debate rages over the extent to which the election of President Trump was the product of unique circumstances, unlikely to be repeated, or a symptom of underlying and possibly durable forces. A prudent assessment would give due weight to the latter explanation. To be sure, the Trump victory in 2016 was a very close-run thing and the election could easily have had a different outcome. But the unconventional and insurgent nature of his campaign clearly had its roots in deep-seated grievances left unaddressed by more conventional politicians. These grievances were not, by and large, about international policy *per se*. Those international issues that did feature in the Trump campaign – and have been carried forward into the policy arena with a vengeance – are closely tied to domestic concerns. Trade, immigration and counter-terrorism are the key examples.

The populist political wave has been described as a revolt against the elites.² It is also a revolt against perceived elite projects, including trade agreements and alliances. President Trump and many of his close advisors harbour deep grievances regarding the perceived abuse of the international trading system by US's economic partners. Trade disputes are hardly new on the Washington agenda, but not since the 1930s have they taken the form of a systematic attack on free trade. In particular, the Trump administration has fuelled a protectionist agenda within the Republican Party, traditionally a bastion of free trade. By contrast, Democrats have always been ambivalent, with some in the labour movement and elsewhere deeply sceptical about the benefits of open economies. The Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), in which the Obama administration invested considerable energy, was already in trouble before Trump came on the scene. And the trouble emanated from both sides of the Atlantic. The Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) was questioned by Hillary Clinton on the campaign trail. It is not surprising that the Trump administration quickly disavowed both initiatives. But the key departure from past trade practice is the current tendency to see free trade as a systemic challenge to the US economy and to pursue trade objectives without reference to other strategic interests. The net effect of the "trade war" with China and the near trade war with European allies has been a general increase in global risk, and not just in economic terms. Arguably, mounting security frictions with China have been kept in check by a shared, underlying stake in an enormously important economic relationship. It is one thing to face an incident over the South China Sea or Taiwan against a backdrop of an essentially stable trade relationship. The ongoing tariff battle opens a second front in an already risky relationship with China.

Similarly, Washington's willingness to invoke national security concerns to impose steel and aluminium tariffs on European allies cuts against the long-term US interest in transatlantic partnership on a global basis. The administration may yet make good on the threat to impose heavy tariffs on European car exports and other goods. This might be portrayed as a good deal for the US worker, but the costs are likely to be felt in other areas where the US has a stake in European cooperation. The resulting risk may not be evident in a steady state, but it could become very obvious in a serious economic or security crisis. In the perception of the administration, trade interests are security interests. It is an approach that harks back to the interwar obsession with economic warfare, and much earlier mercantilist ideas. This new protectionist impulse could prove durable. There is a potent reservoir of protectionism across the US political spectrum, and it could well persist whatever the outcome of the 2020 election. And of course, it is a tendency that risks becoming entrenched in Europe and Asia too. On the other hand, a successor administration is likely to be more adept at "connecting the dots" between trade and security policy in a more traditional fashion.

² For a leading argument along these lines, see Ivan Krastev, "The Age of Populism: Reflections on the Self-enmity of Democracy", in *European View*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (June 2011), p. 11-16.

A hawkish approach to migration issues has been another hallmark of the Trump policy agenda. This is a development with striking echoes in Europe and elsewhere. It is an approach with strong appeal to the president's political base. It could well prove less durable than the hard-line trade agenda. Even the Republican political establishment shows signs of discomfort with the strident rhetoric around the asylum issue, and even more obviously with presidential attempts to circumvent Congress in order to build a "wall" on the border with Mexico. This is, at base, a domestic policy question but it has also become a core issue in relations with Mexico and Central America and encourages Washington to make common cause with hard-line populists on the other side of the Atlantic.

Counter-terrorism was an early priority for the Trump administration. This too, continues to have a close connection to homeland security concerns in the post-9/11 world. It is unlikely to wane as a concern for this or a successor administration, and remains a touchstone for US policy in the Middle East. To the extent that it is possible to discern, President Trump is more attuned to intervention with a counter-terrorism logic than to potentially more consequential geopolitical demands in a regional setting. The territorial defeat of the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) was a clear priority. The drone strike against al-Quds Commander Qasem Soleimani aside, intervention to contain Iran or, for that matter, to counter Russian influence in Syria, has been less compelling. This tendency is likely to face significant challenges in a world of mounting great power competition and regional risk. The October 2019 "green-light" to Turkey for a ground intervention in Syria, perhaps intentional, perhaps not, seems to underscore President Trump's search for exits. Questions of credibility and regional geopolitics do not seem to figure highly in this calculus.³ The US engagement around counter-terrorism missions in Africa, a growing effort for years and important to security cooperation with France, is reportedly set to decline sharply.⁴

Some of this is in tune with preferences across the political spectrum. Towards the end of his administration, President Obama was openly critical of the conventional wisdom on offer from the foreign policy establishment, not least the inclination for intervention as a means of crisis management and the demonstration of resolve. This distaste for the use of force on a significant scale, as opposed to over the horizon and time-limited operations, is now widely shared in Congress and in public opinion. This should not, however, be confused with a desire to retreat from active international engagement, where polling suggest that the US public remains supportive.⁵ All of this is easily understandable as a reaction to an extraordinary period of successive military interventions from the Balkans to Afghanistan and

³ For a detailed analysis of the counter-terrorism experience in the first years of the Trump Administration, see Peter R. Neumann, *Bluster. Donald Trump's War on Terror*, London, Hurst, 2019.

⁴ Helene Cooper et al., "Pentagon Eyes Africa Drawdown as First Step in Global Troop Shift", in *The New York Times*, 24 December 2019, <https://nyti.ms/2ZuClwd>.

⁵ See the results of the 2019 Chicago Council Survey of American Public Opinion and US Foreign Policy: Dina Smeltz et al., *Rejecting Retreat. Americans Support US Engagement in Global Affairs*, Chicago, Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 2019, <https://www.thechicagocouncil.org/node/9891>.

Iraq. Indeed, President Trump's desire to end the almost two decade long US military operation in Afghanistan is one of the few foreign and security policy initiatives from his administration enjoying substantial support in principle across the US strategic class. Sooner or later, it is likely that the US will find a way to disengage from this extraordinarily protracted and disappointing commitment. In Iraq, too, the US and its security partners may be forced to withdraw in the face of a worsening political and force protection climate. This may be seen as a strategic embarrassment in some quarters, but it would be in line with the desire for a reduced presence on the ground.

The US defence community largely shares the prevailing cautious approach to military intervention. But other aspects of US international engagement continue to enjoy strong support at the expert and political levels. Former Defence Secretary James Mattis spoke for many when he said that cuts in US foreign assistance and diplomatic spending would require the country to invest even more heavily in defence. Trump administration efforts to sharply reduce the international aid budget in 2019 met with strong opposition in the House and Senate. Beyond the White House, the commitment to maintaining the instruments of US international engagement remains strong.

3. A different kind of burden-sharing debate

The demand that European allies pay and do more for their defence is hardly new. The burden-sharing argument is decades old and has been repeated in various ways by every post-war administration in Washington. NATO audiences still vividly recall the very pointed speech by then Defence Secretary Robert Gates on this theme in Brussels in 2011. The two-percent "best efforts" commitment agreed at the 2014 NATO summit in Wales predates Trump's election. But the Trump administration has brought a different and edgier discourse to the burden-sharing debate. The starting point is a deep-seated conviction that the US has been getting a "bad deal" from its alliance relationships, an unusual amalgam of trade and defence spending concerns. The prevailing rhetoric emanating from Washington implies that the US commitment to European (and to some extent Asian) defence is contingent rather than the result of shared, even independent interest. President Trump has even suggested that the US collect back payments due as a result of under-spending by NATO allies, especially Germany. The US military presence in Germany might also be on the table, ignoring the reality that any redeployment of this kind would bring substantial costs of its own and reduce the capacity for force projection beyond Europe, including the Middle East. A withdrawal of this sort is most unlikely given strong bipartisan opposition in the Pentagon and Congress. But President Trump's attachment to the idea that US's overseas military commitments are part of a strategic-commercial balance sheet could well persist in populist discourse.

US attitudes toward European defence initiatives have veered from support to scepticism and sometimes opposition. Successive administrations have stressed

the importance of complementarity in NATO and EU defence efforts. But after the end of the Cold War, the foreign and security policy establishment had become more tolerant of European defence efforts of any kind that would produce greater allied capability. This seemed particularly useful in an era of coalition operations requiring a greater European capacity and willingness for power projection. Today, there is a lively debate on both sides of the Atlantic about the utility of the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), the EU's initiative to develop greater military capabilities, and new EU defence investment funds. Washington's view of these efforts combines a measure of traditional scepticism with a distinct emphasis on defence industrial concerns. The uncertain outlook for defence spending increases in Germany and elsewhere gives many US officials and strategists pause, reinforced by concerns about continued US access to the European defence market. These perspectives are very likely to persist beyond the Trump era, even if they take a less strident form.

From the early years of the republic, not a little of US's engagement in and with Europe has been driven by personal and social affinity, and biographical connections across the Atlantic. Until the end of the Cold War, it was common for members of the US foreign policy establishment (and there was such a thing) to have spent at least part of their university years in Europe, often in the United Kingdom, France, Germany or Italy. Today, US policy elites are just as likely to have spent time in Asia or elsewhere. For the society as a whole, the balance of interest between transatlantic relations and developments in Asia is shifting. As the final editions of the Transatlantic Trends survey revealed, there is now a marked generational difference in global attention.⁶ Older generations still see developments in Europe as most important to their own interests. For those born after the Vietnam War, Asia looms larger in their personal perceptions. This does not necessarily mean that the US public feels a greater affinity with Asia. On trade and security, Asia is also a source of concern. But the Asia-Pacific region is simply seen as increasingly consequential for their interests. It is a view closely mirrored in the Washington foreign policy debate where China and the Indo-Pacific are at the top of the agenda.

4. A multi-stakeholder world?

US international policy is more than just a question of what administrations do. Beyond the high political issues of strategy, diplomacy and defence policy per se, US's engagement with the world is complex, multi-faceted and heavily influenced by the behaviour of sub-national actors. To use the phrase now fashionable in technology debates, this is a "multi-stakeholder" environment. Classic multilateralism may be weakening, but the multi-stakeholder approach is augmenting, perhaps even supplanting it in key fields. Climate policy offers one example, where US cities and states have become leading actors both domestically and on the international

⁶ See GMF website: *Transatlantic Trends – Public Opinion*, <http://www.gmfus.org/node/8057>.

scene. When Europeans want to talk to Americans on environmental policy, a stop in New York or California has become a must. Washington's attempt to roll back climate-related regulation will face stiff and protracted legal challenges in key US states. Digital diplomacy offers another example. Several states have emulated Europe's data protection regulation and pressure is building for national-level legislation along these lines. Leading US technology companies are now playing an active role in global digital diplomacy, most visibly through the "Paris Call" on digital policy championed by the Macron government.

Geography, social history and geo-economics are all drivers of a deeper tendency for the US to have multiple international perspectives; multiple international policies, if not foreign policies in the classic sense. The world looks very different from Miami, Los Angeles and the Midwest. None of these perspectives are necessarily inward looking or isolationist. Perceptions of international issues and priorities can vary substantially from the canonical inside-the-beltway worldview. Questions of global security and alliances are less prominent when viewed from US's regions. Questions of trade, migration and technology often top the agenda, alongside the tendency for cities and regions to serve as windows into areas such as the Asia-Pacific or Latin America. The scale is impressive. California itself is the world's seventh largest economy and naturally gives priority to economic connections around the Pacific Rim. Florida is a hub for travel to Central and South America and the Caribbean. There are roughly a dozen flights a day between Miami and Brazil alone. These connections can have tangible effects on US's international engagement, and not just at a commercial and societal level. Migration policy and border control are high on the foreign policy agenda, for better or worse. Concerns about increasingly severe weather affecting these regions – and the southeastern US – are likely to shape the national debate on climate policy and climate diplomacy.

5. The end of a hundred-year pivot to Europe?

Since the second term of the Obama administration, European policymakers and observers have been concerned about the sustainability of US's commitment to Europe. These concerns have been reinforced by President Trump's periodic remarks about European free-riding and his approach to the symbolic and practical meaning of NATO Article V mutual defence commitments. In political and economic terms, the transatlantic relationship will retain enormous importance for any US administration. In terms of military presence, the US commitment to Europe has actually increased in recent years, with a larger footprint on the ground in the Baltic and with new assets deployed around the Mediterranean and the Black Sea. But looking ahead, there is every reason to anticipate a continued shift to more pressing strategic demands in Asia. It would not take much to accelerate this pivot to the Indo-Pacific. Flashpoints in the region loom large in US planning and the potential for accidental military incidents is increasing, not least in the South and East China Seas. At the same time, the underlying Sino-US interest in stability based on shared economic interest is under pressure from trade frictions, if not an active trade war.

The net result of these developments could be the end of a hundred-year US pivot to Europe. Since 1917, the US has been a critical player in European security and the military balance in Europe has, ultimately, turned on US's ability and commitment to a stable Europe – in its own geopolitical interest. The rise of China and the proliferation of risks in Asia raise the prospect of fundamental longer-term shifts in US presence and attention by the world's pre-eminent bi-oceanic power. This prospect – risk might be a better term – can only reinforce the logic of a stronger and potentially more autonomous European defence capability.

Conclusion: Is a foreign policy reset possible?

In the immediate aftermath of the 2016 election, the first instinct in Brussels and elsewhere was to ask how Europe might effectively engage with a new and unconventional president. This approach rapidly gave way to a mood of frustration, resignation and a sense that European leaders (leaders in Warsaw and a few other capitals excepted) would do better to wait for change in Washington. This has now given rise to concern that some aspects of the Trump presidency may be structural and could outlast his term in office, however long. There is little prospect that a second Trump administration would take a fundamentally different tack on trade, climate, Iran or other contentious issues in transatlantic relations. A Democratic victory in 2020 would surely make a difference. Yet, longer-term concerns about China and the potential for a rapid shift to Asia are likely a reality under any political scenario. The fundamental distaste for intervention may well persist. There is no shortage of hawks on trade and Iran in the Democratic Party. Many European concerns will persist even against a different political backdrop in Washington.

By contrast, the prospects for a fundamental change in style are very real. The foreign policy style of the Trump administration has been at such sharp variance with previous administrations, both Republican and Democratic, that a return to a more predictable approach is virtually certain if and when President Trump leaves office. And, to a great extent, style matters in foreign policy. Predictability, credibility and the capacity for crisis management are critical elements from the perspective of allies and adversaries alike. On substance, the prospects for a reset are more mixed, not least because others have adjusted their policies. A reset will need to be mirrored in Beijing, Moscow, Tehran and elsewhere. That said, political change in Washington would open the prospect of a return to the Paris climate accord, a less confrontational approach to trade, and possibly a return to the Iran nuclear deal in some form – if anything of the agreement remains. Above all, the impulses of future US administrations are likely to be less instinctively unilateral, even if the need for reform of the multilateral order the US built and led is now widely acknowledged. More troubling is the risk that the world has moved on to a more fragmented, nationalistic and adversarial footing in which US power is no longer the key variable in global stability.

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