

The insurgency takes Washington

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Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 US presidential elections marks a watershed moment in American political history, and, very possibly, world affairs. Trump has defined his political agenda in opposition to everything that President Obama stands for, claiming more broadly to express the people's anger at an establishment perceived as distant and corrupt. In closing his electoral campaign, Trump told his supporters: "Today the American working class is going to strike back." And they did.

Trump has successfully detected, mobilised and multiplied a deep undercurrent in US politics that his opponents badly misunderstood and underestimated. In hindsight, he was surely much more apt at catching the mood of the country and speaking to the concerns of many ordinary citizens. Trump has tapped into the politics of fear (of losing jobs, of foreigners, of change at large) and turned them into an avowedly nationalist, protectionist and, ultimately, winning agenda. With the Republican Party on course to preserving its majorities in the House and the Senate, and new appointments to the Supreme Court coming up, Trump seems set to hold a firm grip on power.

Trump will take office at a time of deep and growing polarisation in American politics, both between and within parties. Divides have been widening across all sorts of lines, be it along ethnic background, levels of education, income or gender. Trump has struck a conciliatory tone in his first remarks after the election results, congratulating Hillary Clinton and speaking about the need to 'bind the wounds of division'. However, judging from the abrasive rhetoric and extreme positions he displayed during the electoral campaign, he seems hardly fit to rally the US public around shared priorities. This may well point to more fierce partisan struggles and a further deterioration of the quality of the political debate, and efficiency of the political process, in the US.

On the international stage, most observers have stressed that Trump has challenged the fundamental assumptions of US foreign policy. It is telling that many are unclear about what he might actually do once in the White House, and to what extent he will match words with deeds. But some of Trump's positions seem deeply rooted and go back decades. What Trump defines as US national interests have been the only focus of his international agenda – 'America first'. His definition of American interests is very narrow. He rejects that such interests are also embedded in the alliances, commitments and multilateral structures that have framed decades of American global engagement. His nationalist narrative stands in direct opposition to what he disparages as the 'globalist' outlook of the elites that he blames for having forgotten or betrayed the interests of the American people.

In economic matters, Trump espouses a protectionist agenda, pledging to renegotiate or scrap free trade deals and to defend American jobs from the alleged unfair practices of others, such as China. In security affairs, he sees little value in the web of alliances that underpins US global power, accusing instead partners of taking advantage of the American presence and commitments without paying for it. Donald Trump has an eminently transactional view of international affairs, focused on what the US stands to gain from the deals that he maintains he would be able to strike.

Trump's chief security concern is terrorism, in particular the self-proclaimed Islamic State. He has bashed previous administrations both for wasting resources in promoting democracy and building states in faraway lands, and for overthrowing authoritarian regimes in the Middle East, paving the way for the spread of terrorist networks (even if he supported the 2003 invasion of Iraq). Conversely, he has indicated that he would seek to improve relations with Russia, not

least to join forces against terrorism. To be sure, Trump objects to the idea of using the US military in crises or conflicts that do not directly affect US interests, but supports a strong military to preserve America's edge over adversaries. Overall, to use the definition of American scholar Colin Dueck, his foreign policy outlook is that of a 'nationalist conservative': highly sceptical of multilateral entanglements, not inclined to foreign interventions, but very comfortable with using force to defend core US interests abroad if threatened.

Trump's nationalist and transactional approach to foreign policy will likely apply to the transatlantic partnership too. During the campaign, he has openly questioned American commitment to NATO unless allies pay much more for US protection. He does not seem to value the European Union (EU) as a pivotal partner, having for example expressed support for the choice of UK voters to 'gain back control' from Brussels in the Brexit referendum. The election results will compound and accelerate two trends already unfolding in transatlantic affairs. For one, Europeans cannot expect the US to fix Europe's security problems, unless they affect the US in very direct ways. For another, the US will ask Europeans to take on much more responsibility for their security, as a condition for US commitment to Europe.

Trump is likely to favour bilateral dealings with EU member states over multilateral settings, which might well contribute to reinforce the centrifugal forces already at play within the EU. Divisions within Europe might also widen if Trump were actually to prove to be willing, as some believe, to trade better relations with Russia for some sort of recognition of Russia's sphere of influence in the post-Soviet space, beyond NATO's and EU's borders. On the economic front, TTIP has not been a visible subject in the US electoral campaign, but Trump's stated aversion to large multilateral trade deals suggests that prospects for striking the transatlantic agreement have massively shrunk, if not disappeared.

The line between domestic politics and foreign policy is blurring fast in the US (as well as in Europe), which means that the latter is increasingly a derivate of domestic agendas, partisan struggles, and populist rhetoric. Foreign policy starts at home but, given Trump's campaign statements, there is a risk that his would also pretty much finish at home. Very little consideration has been given to the wider goals and responsibilities that come with great power. Of course, once in office, his priorities and behaviour may well have to adjust to the intricacies of international relations. However, so far his narrative has been one of disruption of many long-held tenets of US foreign policy. The question is whether, faced with this scenario, Europeans will press forward and join forces to shape a stronger common foreign, security and defence policy. The first reflex across Europe will be to seek pragmatic ways to continue working with the new administration. For example, President Juncker and President Tusk have wasted no time to invite Donald Trump to hold an EU-US summit in the near future. Were things to turn bitter on key dossiers, then the ball would be in Europe's court. With European solidarity wearing thin after years of crises, it is doubtful whether Europeans would be able to rise to the challenge.

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