
DISCUSSION PAPER

Lost in transition? US foreign policy from Obama to Trump

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Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 US presidential elections has shaken long-held assumptions about American foreign policy, as well as the country's strategic priorities. In many ways, Trump's foreign policy discourse is defined by his opposition to the grand strategy of international liberal order building and forward-leaning military posture in Europe and Asia that previous administrations have more or less consistently pursued since World War II. In a nutshell, the president-elect has been outlining in the course of the campaign a harshly nationalist and protectionist agenda. If fully implemented, this would lead to a drastic downscaling of American commitments abroad, as well as to global economic and potentially geopolitical turmoil.

Trump's election has engendered huge uncertainty on the future course of US foreign policy. A number of questions are being intensely debated worldwide. Does the president-elect actually mean what he says and will he be prepared to implement his core electoral statements concerning foreign affairs? What room for manoeuvre will President Trump have once he is in the White House, considering domestic and external constraints? Will the president's personality matter more to decision-making with Trump than with his predecessors, possibly making US foreign policy more volatile and unpredictable? What do ongoing and upcoming appointments in key foreign and security policy positions say about the possible course of the new administration on the international stage? Will President Trump even care that much about foreign policy at all, or will it be an occasional preoccupation, with measures largely dictated by domestic or personal considerations?

The one safe answer to all of these questions is that nobody really knows. While only time will tell, this paper seeks to take a step back from the flurry of commentaries on what President Trump may or may not do and provide some coordinates to make sense of the uncertainty. The paper sets Trump's own stated positions in the context of the US strategic debate at the end of Obama's two terms and reviews some of the political traditions and schools of thought that inform Trump's vague but potentially consequential foreign policy agenda. This exercise also provides the basis from which to draw the possible implications of this agenda for Europe and the future of the transatlantic partnership.

Looking at the state of the strategic debate in the US does not imply that Trump's foreign policy will be consistent with any particular school of thought. It is however relevant for two reasons. The first reason being, this debate brings to the fore a range of fundamental questions, which, if left unaddressed by any American administration, are likely to come back and haunt it. How to distinguish vital national interests from a whole list of important ones? What is the threshold for the use of military force and how to apply it effectively and legitimately? How to frame complex relationships with rivals or challengers whose cooperation may be critical to deliver results on key dossiers? How relevant are alliances and partnerships to US power, security and prosperity? How to convince

allies and partners to do more to provide for their security? Is preserving the open international system that has benefited the US (and many others) a strategic priority for the US or not?

The other reason is the notable (re-)emergence of a strand of realist thinking by which the US should adopt a much more restrained foreign policy posture, cutting commitments abroad and focusing on core national interests. For decades, this position has not gained much traction among the Republican and Democratic foreign policy establishment but it increasingly resonates with deep currents in American politics, as starkly demonstrated by the election of Donald Trump. Today, some of Trump's broad foreign policy positions appear to be in line with these realist ideas. This is not to say, however, that a realist agenda will necessarily inform Trump's foreign policy at large. The tradition of American politics that can be seen as encompassing most of Trump's statements on both internal and external affairs is the 'Jacksonian' one, which expresses strong anti-elite and nationalist sentiments. The question remains whether Trump's foreign policy will prove consistent with the Jacksonian instincts exposed by his campaign.

As with any incoming administration, Trump's will inherit the foreign policy record of the previous one, namely that of President Obama. Judging from the electoral campaign, Trump's personality, views and agenda stand out as the opposite of Obama's. What is distinctive about foreign policy, however, is that it is shaped by a combination of internal and external trends and factors, and that many of the latter fall outside the control of any individual government. Even assuming that Trump's foreign policy will be highly transactional, opportunistic, and driven by a very different set of priorities to Obama's, it will still have to cope with the shifting international context that Obama had to deal with. President Trump will not operate in a void, but in a world that is *de facto* highly interdependent and vulnerable to crises and disruptions.

Over the last eight years, the Obama administration has faced the chief challenge of adjusting the global role of the US in an age of profound change and growing constraints on international action. The record of President Obama on this account has been subject to heated debate. Supporters maintain that he has charted a realistic course to advance US core interests, working with partners and engaging with rivals where need be. Detractors argue that he has undermined US credibility in the world and weakened its position in the eyes of both rivals and partners. The core of the matter is that the US remains by far the largest power in the world, yet finds it increasingly difficult to wield its power. In response to this challenge, some have argued that it is a matter of scaling down ends, whilst others believe that it is about scaling up means. Donald Trump's statements point to a mix of these positions, but his views on how to deal with constraints on US power and interests remain vague. Reviewing the debate about Obama's foreign policy legacy is a good starting point to look at the challenges that President Trump will face and at how his potential choices might affect international affairs and Europe in particular.

Obama's contested doctrine

Upon taking office, Obama's driving foreign policy objectives were: reversing the American overstretch after two long and inconclusive military interventions in the Middle East; shifting the US strategic focus towards Asia as the most consequential region for global politics and economics; and investing in multinational partnerships and cooperation, to deal with complex challenges and uphold the liberal international order. These priorities were the product of the particular set of circumstances and expectations that surrounded Obama's victory in 2008. For one, the deep economic downturn generated by the financial meltdown of 2007-08, which required a focus on restoring the domestic foundations of American international influence (foreign policy starts at home). For another, the discredit of the Bush administration's foreign policy doctrine (regime change, pre-emptive wars), and the need to rebuild the reputation, or soft power, of the US in many parts of the world.

At the same time, these overarching goals reflected some distinctive traits of Obama's worldview.¹ First, the intuition that preserving US primacy required recalibrating priorities in ways consistent with a more contested and polycentric international environment. That meant better distinguishing between vital interests, such as preventing terrorist attacks in the US or nuclear proliferation, and others. Second, an instinctive appreciation of the complexity of international affairs, and a reluctance to take drastic measures in response to unfolding events. Hence the effort to 'compartmentalise' relations with challengers and strike a balance between competition and cooperation, for example in relations with Russia and China. Third, a determination to avoid military entanglements in seemingly intractable conflicts, notably in the Middle East, and more generally to use force in more precise and delimited ways, while relying more on allies. Fourth, the belief that international politics is not just about power balances but also about the power of example and ideas, which can provide the foundation for effective international cooperation in support of an open international system.

Obama's foreign policy has proven far from consensual, with controversy growing over the years on both his assumptions and his results. Keeping in mind Trump's election and his positioning in the US strategic debate, it is important to stress that criticism of Obama's foreign policy comes from two sides, which mobilise opposing arguments.

Advocates of a more proactive and robust foreign policy claim that President Obama simply neglected foreign affairs to the advantage of a predominant focus on his domestic political agenda. By one account, "Obama's idea of foreign policy is that there should be less of it."² With a view to minimising American commitments abroad, Obama's international strategy would largely consist of retrenchment and accommodation, including unilateral moves to appease rivals.³ The result of this approach would be to create a power vacuum that would frustrate allies and embolden rivals, affecting the credibility of the US as a security provider. In particular, many saw the lack of a military response to the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime in the summer of 2013, in direct breach of the red line set by Obama, as a major self-inflicted blow to the reputation of the US. Those who chastise the foreign policy of the outgoing administration for being too restrained point to the fact that the Middle East is gravely destabilised and that rivals such as Russia, China and Iran are expanding their spheres of influence in key global regions, or seeking to do so, while the US is not doing enough to counter them.⁴ Geopolitics is back with a vengeance and, in their view, the US is opting out of the contest.

From a completely different standpoint, Obama has been criticised not for doing too little, but for continuing to do too much. His instincts have been correct in focusing on first order threats to the US and on the rise of Asia, but he has not really abandoned traditional assumptions about US 'exceptionalism', and he has maintained an excessive level of international engagement instead of shifting the burden on to allies.⁵ Trump's attacks on the foreign policy of his predecessors, including Obama, echo in part this line of argument. According to him, the US has wasted a lot of resources in seeking to deliver security and promote democracy in regions where American interests were not directly at stake, and US allies could have taken care of business.

Supporters of Obama's foreign policy argue that he has chosen to defend US national interests and the international liberal order in more sustainable and less confrontational ways.⁶ In their view, Obama has rightly refused to give in to the pressure for immediate action under a seamless news cycle, and has instead played the 'long game' – "a long-term strategy that combines balance, patience and restraint."⁷ For one, they point to the fact that the US is in a better place today than when Obama took office, in terms of both power fundamentals (economic growth, energy resources, innovation etc.), and international image. For another, they argue that Obama has done what strategy is supposed to be about, namely setting priorities. He differentiated between first-order national security interests, whose defence might require the unilateral use of force, and other concerns, which would require gradual responses. The latter might include military measures as a last resort, but within a multilateral framework.

From this standpoint, for example, the US does not have enough at stake in Ukraine to risk an open conflict with Russia, which justifies a measured response to contain Moscow's aggression. Likewise, in this view, the US should prevent conflicts in the Middle East from further destabilising the region and work diplomatically to resolve them, but it cannot and should not try to impose solutions on its own, and surely not via extensive military engagement, unless core national interests are at stake. In short, Obama has sought to maintain the US role as the 'indispensable' nation to achieve results in international affairs, and supporters claim he did, but at acceptable costs and risks given the necessary weighting of often competing priorities on the global stage.⁸

These different interpretations of Obama's foreign policy lead of course to disparate assessments of his results. For example, critics often point to the distance between lofty aspirations and sobering outcomes. Again, criticism arises from two opposite sides. Some refer to the attempts to develop or 'reset' relations with rival powers on more cooperative grounds, which in practice did not lead very far, or to the fact that the initial endorsement of the Arab Spring as an opportunity for democratic change was followed by what they see as American withdrawal from the region. Others, and Trump belongs to this camp, believe that the US has no business in sorting out civil wars, defending populations against massive human rights violations or pursuing nation-building; policies that have in their view resulted in destabilising the Middle East. Instead, the US should focus on much narrower goals, notably the fight against Islamic terrorism, and work with any partner who shares this priority. In defence of the Obama administration, some retort that US foreign policy has been much more dynamic and robust than often portrayed, stressing for example the intensification of the US defence partnerships with Asian countries, or the determination to strike terrorists via drones and special operations forces.⁹

These debates expose not only different political or ideological leanings, but also the difficulty of formulating sweeping judgements on what has been a nuanced and hybrid foreign policy strategy.¹⁰ Some of the critics recognise that Obama's foreign policy has been more than just retrenchment, including elements of: containment (North Korea and China); regime change (Libya); roll-back of adversaries (ISIS); and efforts to nudge rivals towards reform and cooperation (China and Russia).¹¹ While all grand strategies include a variety of dimensions, and, in practice, none fit orderly into theoretical paradigms, Obama's foreign policy and worldview seem particularly difficult to capture through traditional frames. It is quite telling that many definitions of Obama's outlook and doctrine seek to reconcile opposites. The outgoing president would be 'an ideological liberal with a conservative temperament',¹² a 'Hobbesian optimist',¹³ a 'liberal realist' or a 'principled pragmatist'.¹⁴ According to a prominent realist like Stephen Walt, "the non-realist dimension of Obama's foreign policy has been as prominent as the realist one."¹⁵

The main reason why Obama's approach to foreign policy eludes one-sided definitions is that he has been keenly aware of the need to walk a fine line between 'the world as it is' and 'the world we seek'¹⁶ in order to make some progress. This necessarily requires an empirical approach and, sometimes, 'hard choices'.¹⁷ Administration insiders have reported that Obama has been comfortable with incremental change, acknowledging that some problems can only be managed.¹⁸ Others have noted that Obama recognises that although the US is still 'indispensable', it may no longer be decisive. In other words, American engagement remains a necessary condition to accomplish results in international affairs, yet it is no longer a sufficient one. This entails an emphasis on partnerships and cooperation, not only to achieve policy goals but also, in Obama's words, because "multilateralism regulates hubris."¹⁹

This overarching approach has distanced Obama from what he considers the 'Washington playbook' on foreign policy, namely the prevalent bipartisan consensus on some of the fundamental assumptions and drivers of American foreign policy and grand strategy.²⁰ Core to this consensus would be the overriding objective to preserve American primacy through means that may or may not be coercive, depending on more liberal or conservative approaches, but either way through a more assertive and extensive engagement on the global stage than that of the outgoing administration to support US interests, values and allies. Those who call for a more proactive American engagement abroad may have been dissatisfied with various aspects of Obama's foreign policy. The real challenge to their agenda has come, however, from an alternative strategic approach that features priorities much more distant from theirs than those of the outgoing president – the realist school that advocates the scaling back of US commitments abroad.

Debating strategies

Offering a full overview of the vast debate on US strategic options and priorities goes far beyond the scope of this paper. This section aims to sketch out the two main competing strategic approaches defining the perimeter of this debate: offshore balancing and deep engagement. The foreign policy of the new administration will be situated at some point along the continuum between these diverging approaches, even if, as noted above, the approach of each administration includes a variety of dimensions at once. The question is which of these sets the tone and frames others.

Offshore balancing, which critics label as sheer retrenchment or isolationism, calls for a more modest strategic posture and a focus on protecting a few, core national interests. Deep engagement, branded by its opponents as 'liberal hegemony', calls for the US to maintain or renew its global engagement to underwrite the international liberal order. The two broad camps encompass, of course, a variety of positions. For example, supporters of deep engagement include liberal internationalists that emphasise multilateral institution-building and cooperation, as well as conservative internationalists and neo-conservatives, who are more comfortable with the use of force.

Trump's victory represents a hard setback for the advocates of extended and deep US engagement abroad. As discussed in the next section, Trump appears to be more of a conservative nationalist than a realist. Oftentimes, his extreme statements such as on the use of torture techniques to fight terrorism have clearly set him aside from serious realist scholars and commentators. However, the core tenets of a realist approach to US foreign policy seem to frame some of his core positions, in particular when it comes to downscaling US commitments abroad and to relations with other big powers. Proponents of the realist approach of offshore balancing maintain that the strategy of 'liberal hegemony' subscribed to by mainstream republicans and democrats has failed.²¹ They point to

what they see as the 'abysmal record' of the last 25 years of US foreign policy, including: an increasingly assertive China; the breakdown of relations with Russia; the destabilisation of the Middle East; the failure of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process; the incremental retreat of democracy; and the inability to accomplish the objectives of the military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq.²²

In short, what they regard as an 'undisciplined, expensive and bloody' strategy has severely damaged US security and interests.²³ For one, it has encouraged others to balance against the US, like China, Russia and Iran, or to target them, like terrorists or insurgents. For another, it has amounted to 'welfare for the rich', allowing allies to freeride on US security guarantees instead of investing in their own security. Yet another downside of this approach would be that US guarantees might encourage smaller partners to challenge powerful neighbours, with the risk of dragging the US into an unintended confrontation. From a different standpoint, the narrative of an indispensable and super-powerful America has been criticised as effectively debased. First, the US ability to get others to do what they want, whether through threats or incentives, is rapidly shrinking – "We can't lead if others won't follow". Second, the US public is increasingly allergic to foreign interventions that they do not understand.²⁴

Based on this damning assessment, critics of liberal hegemony call for a major strategic shift towards a strategy of restraint and offshore balancing. The latter would consist of drastically scaling back international commitments and focusing on fewer, clearly defined core national interests. These would include: preserving American predominance in the western hemisphere; preventing rivals from taking over key global regions, namely Europe, the Gulf and East Asia; fending off the terrorist threat; and preventing nuclear proliferation. The implication of this approach is that the US should progressively withdraw their forces from Europe and the Gulf, where no alternative hegemony looms on the horizon (Russia and Iran being, in this view, not powerful enough), and allies are in the position to provide for their own security. Given the rise of China, however, prominent advocates of offshore balancing believe that the US should remain committed and engaged through relevant forces in Asia-Pacific to contain the only potential rival to their power in Asia and beyond.²⁵ In case of a major upset to the balance of power in Europe or the Middle East, the US would be in the position to go back on-shore, support their allies and push aggressors back.

Those who support restraint do not label themselves as isolationists. On the contrary, for most of them the declared intent is to preserve US primacy, but to do so through a more sustainable and less antagonising strategy. Offshore balancing would not only diminish the risks of 'commitment-creep', but also reduce the costs of large military deployments abroad, and diminish US exposure to all sorts of accusations of meddling in the domestic affairs of others. Besides, a strategy of restraint would better fit the public mood in the US, thereby gaining broader support for foreign policy, and allowing the country to refocus on pressing domestic priorities.

Those who back a strategy of forward or deep engagement find the core tenets of offshore balancing flawed and delusive. First, US military expenditure as a share of GDP is relatively low by historical standards, and reducing it while maintaining a strong expeditionary capability would not save much money. Second, withdrawing from key regions would not only create a power vacuum, but would also increase US reliance on authoritarian allies, like in the Middle East. Third, disengagement would diminish overall American influence abroad, as the latter relies on a robust military posture and on the preservation of the international liberal order at large. In short, in this view, adopting a strategy of offshore balancing would risk trading 'relatively marginal short-term savings for higher long-term costs.'²⁶

This criticism is based on the fundamental assumption that the US has played a leading role in establishing and preserving the international liberal order that it hugely benefits from, and that this order would not survive the withdrawal of the US.²⁷ Advocates of deep engagement stress that this strategy offers a range of advantages. For one, the fact that the US is the ultimate security provider in pivotal and unstable global regions helps decrease the risk of conflicts or arms races there, as partners are reassured and rivals deterred. For another, US power underwrites an open international system that enables global exchanges and international cooperation, while offering Washington considerable leverage on third countries across a variety of issues. As some have put it, "US leadership does not come for free: the US extracts disproportionate benefits."²⁸ There is therefore both a normative and a utilitarian case for maintaining or enhancing a forward-leaning strategic posture.

Robert Kagan argued that "superpowers don't get to retire".²⁹ He warns against the temptation of what he defines a return to "normalcy". That would consist of a shift from the definition of American interests as encompassing

those of many others in building and defending a stable international order to a narrow definition of national interests, similar to that of other countries. He recalls the consequences of the US' retreat from international responsibilities between the two world wars in the 20th century, and argues that what he considers current American 'escapism' would eventually result in a return of harsh power politics on the global stage. Order is based on power and would be short-lived in the absence of a forceful US commitment to uphold it.

This is the reason why, according to supporters of deep engagement, there is a need to revamp and reassert American power. A group of leading foreign policy thinkers from both sides of the political spectrum has published in 2016 what can be seen as a manifesto for a more proactive US leadership in world affairs.³⁰ Having recognised that American power ultimately depends on the health of the US economy, not least to ensure political support for a proactive foreign policy agenda, they recommend a range of measures to confirm and expand US engagement in Asia, Europe and the Middle East. These include managing US-China relations ('the single most consequential challenge for US foreign policy') by simultaneously deterring the rising giant and seeking to integrate it in the liberal order. The US should re-engage with Europe to help reverse worrying trends there, since "the transatlantic community remains both the foundation and the core of the liberal world order." There is also a need to undertake a long-term effort to resolve the multiple crises affecting the Middle East, because the dangers stemming from the region cannot be contained. All of this is predicated, according to the report, on the political will to preserve the US military's edge over adversaries through adequate investments (increasing defence spending) and innovation. Military power remains a necessary, albeit insufficient, requirement for global political influence.

The report's recommendations broadly fit into an important and long-established strand of thinking in US foreign policy establishment, centred on the notion of the country's 'exceptional' role and mission as a force for good in the world. Predictably, the report has also attracted criticism from opponents of deep engagement, who believe that it provides new arguments for a strategy that does not work. While the authors of the report argue that demand for US leadership is growing worldwide, sceptics retort that the report does not address the potential reaction of other powers to a more assertive US strategy, and that it avoids making choices between several priorities.³¹

Following the victory of Donald Trump, most of the precepts of this report and more generally of the supporters of a strategy of deep engagement have very little to no chance of being implemented. The president-elect surely believes in American 'exceptionalism', but, in his conservative nationalist interpretation of this narrative, this does not mean that US values should be exported or supported abroad. Trump also emphasises the importance of a strong military, yet not as a tool of a liberal interventionist or neoconservative agenda. Rather, as illustrated below, US military supremacy is to be preserved to defend the country from any threat and defeat any enemy. Above all, Trump does not seem interested in mobilising US power to support the international order. According to some realists, the order would survive a retrenchment of the US because the latter would lower international tensions. Others believe that other powers, whether they are democracies or authoritarian regimes, have a stake in preserving an open international system, even if they disagree with the US on a range of issues. In the case of Trump, it would appear that he is not convinced that the current international system is beneficial enough to US interests in the first place.

The definition of Trump as a foreign policy realist is a subject of debate. Realist scholars have clearly opposed Hillary Clinton's foreign policy agenda, as they considered it to be in line with the expansive approach to American liberal hegemony, or, worse, a more 'hawkish' spin on President Obama's foreign policy.³² Part of the realist prescriptions for US strategy and some of Trump's statements essentially overlap. For example, leading realist Stephen Walt agreed with three of Trump's main positions, notably on the fact that US foreign policy should be about promoting national interests, that allies must stop free-riding on American protection, and that nation building efforts have failed and should not be pursued further. At the same time, however, he stressed that, given the variety of other awkward and offensive statements in Trump's discourse (such as those made against Hispanics and Muslims), he was actually tarnishing sensible ideas and undermining prospects for a serious debate on US foreign policy.³³

Others argue that Trump is simply not a realist. His foreign policy approach would deviate from realism in that he would aim to shake up the international system instead of preserving the status quo; he would abandon resisting Putin's attempts to upend the balance of power in Europe that is advantageous for the US; and he would

be prepared to give up on protecting allies, thereby increasing the risk of conflict.³⁴ After the elections, Walt suggested an organising principle that could fit Trump's overall vision; scaling back American foreign commitments abroad while at the same time reassuring allies. This would be the idea of 'Westphalian sovereignty', which includes non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries and the respect of territorial integrity. He is far from sure, however, that the Trump's administration would be able to perform this balancing act.³⁵

At the roots of Trump's foreign policy

This overview of the controversy surrounding President Obama's foreign policy legacy and of the wider debate between the two main camps in US strategic affairs – advocates of restraint and advocates of deep engagement – helps situate Trump's foreign policy outlook among competing positions. It also helps highlight some of the thorny issues with which the US foreign policy community has been preoccupied over the last few years, and which the new administration will not be able to evade. Many have pointed out that the president-elect has been inconsistent in the course of the electoral campaign, oscillating between very extreme propositions and less far-fetched statements. For example, Trump has backtracked on his position on deporting all illegal immigrants living in the US, and on banning all Muslims from entering the country. Such incoherence further complicates any attempt to anticipate the new president's actual agenda and justifies the uncertainty about both his policy priorities and the ways he will pursue them. That said, based on the electoral campaign and earlier statements, the following appear the core tenets of Trump's approach to foreign affairs.³⁶

- First of all, 'America First'. Trump's vision is a deeply nationalist one, where national interests are to be the sole guide of US action in the world, and those interests are narrowly defined. What is new is not the focus on preserving American primacy, the belief in US 'exceptionalism', or even the determination to 'make America great again'.³⁷ All of those ideas were present in all previous US administrations since World War II, although expressed with different formulations and carrying different policy implications. The disruptive novelty of Trump's approach is that the way to achieve those goals is by pulling back from international engagement. National interests are not seen as embedded in the alliances, partnerships and multilateral institutions that the US has greatly contributed to create. So far, Trump's statements point to a low consideration of the value of alliances, from Europe to Asia, for US national security and global influence.
- Second, the promotion of nationalism goes hand in hand with the drastic rejection of 'globalism' and the much despised elites who, in Trump's view, have constantly expanded American foreign commitments and agreed to international treaties that would profit themselves but harm the well-being of American workers. Whether on the commercial or security front, the US is the victim of 'bad deals' with other countries, notably in terms of providing security to allies that do not invest sufficiently in their own, or of losing American jobs because of allegedly unfair competition. The solution would consist of re-opening those deals (NAFTA) or retreating from them (Trans-Pacific Partnership – TPP) and, where possible, negotiating new ones, which leads to an overtly protectionist agenda on economic matters.
- Third, Trump has exposed a very transactionalist view of foreign policy. One whereby relationships are judged based on what they deliver for the US. Whether relationships are grounded in common values and shared historical bonds appears a secondary consideration, if a relevant one at all, in this very business-like approach to international affairs. Donald Trump has been portraying himself as a very good and tough negotiator, bent on extracting the best deals for the US in a world where strength wins respect. Trump has said that the US would get along with anybody who wants to get along with the US. Conversely, wider systemic considerations on the benefits for the US and others of investing in an open, rule-based international system beyond separate, issue-specific transactions seem absent from Trump's worldview.
- Fourth, the president-elect has put a lot of emphasis on the need to restore US military power after a few years of declining budgets, and to use it in a much more forceful way against America's enemies. Trump considers Islamic terrorism and notably ISIS the chief threat to the US, and countering it entails cooperating with anybody willing to join the fight, notably Russia in the Syrian theatre. He rejects instead mobilising the US military for regime change, nation-building or stabilisation purposes and has bashed previous administrations for wasting resources in such efforts. This appears to go together with an appreciation for authoritarian regimes, who are able to keep their countries under control.

This overarching approach to foreign affairs frames the priorities for action on the international stage that Donald Trump has reiterated over and over again in the course of the electoral campaign. Some of these are included in the action plan that he has pledged to implement during his first 100 days in Office.³⁸ These include: announcing the intention to renegotiate or withdraw from NAFTA; withdrawing from the TPP; labelling China as a currency manipulator; cancelling payments to UN climate change programmes; and introducing legislative measures to eliminate caps on military spending (the so-called defence sequester), and expand military investment. Besides, the president-elect has pledged to "suspend immigration from terror-prone regions where vetting cannot safely occur" on the first day of his mandate. After the elections, Trump has confirmed that he will withdraw the US from the TPP as soon as he takes office.

Other foreign policy positions and priorities have not been listed in this contract but have been frequently addressed during the election campaign, although the statements have not always been coherent. For one, the president-elect has openly put in question the reliability of the American commitment to the NATO collective defence pledge if allies do not pay more for their security. He subsequently said that he supports NATO and that the alliance should take on a much stronger counter-terrorist role, which is consistent with Trump's identification of terrorism as the overarching threat faced by the US. Trump has also indicated that he would operate to improve relations with Russia, which have seriously deteriorated under the Obama administration over the Ukrainian and Syrian crises, among other controversial issues. The president-elect sees Russia as a potential key partner in the fight against terrorism and does not seem very concerned with Russia's goals and behaviour in the post-Soviet space, including Eastern Europe. Besides, Donald Trump has repeatedly expressed his opposition to the nuclear deal that the Obama administration and other world powers have struck with Iran in 2015, saying that he wants to renegotiate it and that he could just walk away from it.

These and other controversial positions have triggered a vast debate on whether the president-elect would actually carry out his agenda and, if so, to what extent and with what means. This will, of course, depend on both domestic and external variables. Pointing out some of the main internal factors that may affect the foreign policy posture of the next administration can provide some clues about Trump's foreign policy. These factors include Trump's own experience and personality, the ongoing appointments to key foreign and security policy posts in the US government, and the fluid foreign policy stance of the Republican Party.

With regards to the first factor, Trump's election has unleashed a stream of alarmed reactions from almost all corners of the US foreign policy community. Many critics argue that the combination of Trump's lack of experience in international affairs, his tendency to disregard facts, and his tough-guy attitude poses a major problem at the core of American foreign policy and will make it highly unpredictable.³⁹ A president's personality can play a critical role in many ways. For example, it will at least in part determine reactions to unforeseen crises, including possible terrorist attacks, regional conflicts or simply the failure to reach the deals that the president-elect claims he can strike. Conversely, if Trump's domestic agenda did not deliver (for example due to the wave of retaliatory measures that his protectionist policies might generate, hitting American workers) he might be tempted to double-down on uncompromising attitudes abroad to divert attention from problems at home. Some observers, while sharing serious concerns about Trump's ideas and instincts, believe that Trump may do better than many expect if he were to set up a competent team.⁴⁰

At this stage, all eyes are on the senior appointments to the top posts of the new administrations that the president-elect is progressively announcing. There is an argument that US foreign policy is the result of clashes, mediation and compromise between different agencies and the figures leading them, as well as between the executive branch and Congress. If Trump's declarations and instincts are not reassuring, this process would act as a brake. However, the president does have a lot of room for manoeuvre in foreign and security policy, and a process of centralisation of key foreign policy decisions in the White House has long been underway.⁴¹ The first appointments to key positions in the security apparatus, including those of National Security Adviser (retired army lieutenant general Michael Flynn) and head of the CIA (Republican Representative Mike Pompeo), draw from the ranks of Trump's close supporters who have backed the president-elect's very hardline discourse on issues such as the threat of Islamic terrorism and the Iran nuclear deal.⁴² Trump's future choice for the post of Secretary of State is the subject of much attention and speculation at the time of writing. Mitt Romney, one of Trump's critics within the Republican Party and a supporter of a proactive and internationalist foreign policy agenda, is reportedly among the top favourites for the job. If he was appointed, that could signal the president-elect's intention to at least avoid deepening existing divides on foreign policy within the party.

The fact that his views are not shared within the Republican Party may affect the course of US foreign policy under President Trump. For example, the Republican chairman of the Senate Armed Service Committee, John McCain, has clearly rejected the prospect of a 'reset' of relations with Russia as unacceptable.⁴³ Republican Senator Rand Paul said he would oppose some of the candidates considered for the post of Secretary of State, namely Rudolph Giuliani and John Bolton, on the grounds of their support for the Iraq war in 2003 and their hawkish attitudes towards Iran.⁴⁴ These examples point to the diversity of foreign policy stances and traditions within the Republican Party, which Trump's victory may help paper over in the short term but is unlikely to erase. At the same time, the terms of the debate with the GOP, and the respective weight of different positions, are shifting.

Before the rise of Donald Trump in the course of the primaries, Colin Dueck argued that, for the first time since the Eisenhower-Taft challenge of the early 1950s, "the basic foreign policy direction of the Republican Party is truly up for grabs between some dramatically different visions regarding America's role in the world."⁴⁵ He identified three main strands of foreign policy thinking in the Republican Party, namely conservative anti-interventionists, conservative internationalists and conservative nationalists, and he noted that the first group, while still a minority, is gaining ground.

Conservative anti-interventionists, of which Senator Rand Paul is a prominent representative, have been on the rise during Obama's administration. In Dueck's words, they "look to avoid foreign wars, cut military expenditures, scale back on US alliance commitments, and keep the costs of American grand strategy to a bare minimum." This was the mainstream position among American conservatives between the two world wars but became marginal after World War II. In the last few years, they have intercepted the US public's growing aversion to military adventures abroad. To recall the parameters of the US strategic debate illustrated above, conservative anti-interventionists favour a strategy of retrenchment and offshore balancing.

The mainstream foreign policy stance of the Republican Party has long consisted of the muscular conservative internationalist approach. Dueck notes that a number of prominent Republicans identify with this tradition, including Mitt Romney, John McCain, Paul Ryan, Lindsay Graham and Marco Rubio. While this group includes a variety of positions, conservative internationalists broadly favour a robust and proactive US foreign policy, a strong military, alliances with like-minded democracies and a tough stance towards those perceived as rivals, such as Russia, China and Iran.⁴⁶ Conservative internationalists are therefore among those calling for a posture of deep engagement in the context of the US strategic debate.

Based on this distinction, Donald Trump's foreign policy seems to broadly fit the conservative nationalist tradition (America first, hard line on security), with an anti-interventionist twist. Conservative nationalists want to preserve US sovereignty and national interests above all. They are not inclined to intervene militarily abroad and surely not in the pursuit of liberal internationalist ideals, but they are keen to preserve US military supremacy and have no qualms with the decisive use of force if the US and its interests are threatened. According to Dueck, "they are neither internationalist nor isolationist, but simply hard-line national security hawks."⁴⁷ He notes that conservative nationalists supported the war on terror as a reaction to the 9/11 terrorist attacks but have taken a much more anti-interventionist turn in the last few years, partly in opposition to President Obama. Colin Dueck argued in a recent interview that "some form of conservative nationalism is here to stay. He [Trump] identified it, he revealed it, he tapped into it, he expressed it. I don't think that's just going to disappear if he loses."⁴⁸

This conservative nationalist stance largely coincides with what Walter Russel Mead has defined as the 'Jacksonian' tradition in US foreign policy.⁴⁹ A closer look at the main features of this approach helps understand some of the instincts and ideas at the roots of Trump's foreign policy narrative and political message at large. In his seminal work on the Jacksonian tradition, Mead describes its core principles as honour, self-reliance, respect, equality among the members of a 'folk community', independence from authorities, courage, and deep attachment to the right to own and use firearms. Jacksonians are very suspicious of the US federal government and of elites at large, draw a neat distinction between the members of the folk and others, and believe that the chief duty of the government is to serve the national community, not special interests or foreign ones. Popular heroes challenging the elites to support the well-being of the community gain the loyalty of Jacksonians.

Mead notes that these core attitudes have distinct implications for the Jacksonian approach to foreign policy. He sees a parallel between this line of thinking and classical realism in drawing a clear distinction between internal affairs (the realm of the folk) and the anarchic and violent world outside. Jacksonians put reputation, faith in the

military and readiness to fight at the core of foreign policy and support investment in defence. They are not eager to intervene abroad if the US is not threatened but, if it is, they would not hesitate to use all necessary force.

According to Mead, Andrew Jackson is back.⁵⁰ After years of frontal confrontation between the Obama administration and its liberal backers on one side and the Jacksonian instincts forming part of the American public opinion on the other, "What we are seeing in American politics today is a Jacksonian surge." The latter has seen in Trump the leader who opposes the establishment in the name of the people. This also explains why this trend has deeply unsettled the established equilibrium in the Republican Party and sank the presidential aspirations of prominent party figures. Differences between traditional conservatives and Jacksonians also explain the rift illustrated above between the so far prevalent internationalist outlook of the Republican Party and the emergence of ever stronger nationalist and protectionist, if not isolationist, tendencies. This is not to say that all of Trump's backers can be described as belonging to the Jacksonian tradition or that Trump necessarily endorses all of it. However, those voters whose views of domestic politics (low taxes, stop to immigration, support the American middle class) and foreign affairs (focus on terrorism, strong military, neglect of international institutions) fit this tradition have surely put their confidence in Trump.

Implications for Europe

The parameters of the transatlantic partnership have been shifting long before the 2016 presidential elections. Donald Trump's victory there represents, however, a potential turning point in this evolution. Relations between Europe and the US during President Obama's tenure have brought to the fore what appears to be a paradox. Whether it is about emphasising partnerships and multilateralism or showing restraint in the use of force, Obama 'thinks more like a European'⁵¹ but his strategic focus shifted away from Europe, towards Asia-Pacific. In fact, at the outset of Obama's first term, Europe was seen in Washington not as a problem but as a partner. The expectation was therefore that Europe would require less investment and would contribute more to US efforts in other regions. Over time, this perception changed, first due to growing concerns that the Eurozone crisis could spiral out of control, and then given the crisis in Ukraine in 2013/2014, the refugee crisis and the major terrorist attacks in the EU in 2015/2016. Incrementally, the US shifted its focus back to Europe, seeing it as a continent affected by a number of challenges and vulnerabilities. The successive NATO summits in Wales in 2014 and in Warsaw in 2016 were important milestones in this process.

By then, however, and despite Obama's enduring popularity in Europe, a degree of mutual disappointment had sunk in.⁵² Some in Europe felt that the US was neglecting the threats facing the continent and many in Washington grew disillusioned with the ability of Europeans to manage their own affairs. On balance, two points stand out. First, Europeans and Americans see each other as less dependable than eight years ago. Second, as Obama leaves office, Europeans are arguably more dependent on the US for their security than they were when he took office, given both the destabilisation of the EU's neighbourhood and the various crises that have weakened the EU's cohesion.

As the US went to the polls, various pundits argued that the transatlantic partnership would need to change regardless of the results of the elections. One noted: "America will likely become more self-centred and less predictable as an international partner, no matter who is president."⁵³ Others warned that "The evolution of the United States' global leadership may create lasting damage in the transatlantic partnership if the implications are not fully understood by Europe and Canada."⁵⁴ Multiple sources compound the same message: "no balanced transatlantic partnership will emerge meaningfully unless the states of Europe assume together the greater role to which they aspire, and which the United States expects."⁵⁵ That said, most expected that, if Clinton had won, any rebalancing of the partnership would have been incremental and couched in a broader message restating the importance of transatlantic relations. It would have been 'tough love' within a still intimate relationship.⁵⁶

The election of Donald Trump raises a number of questions and is likely to have far-reaching consequences for Europe and transatlantic relations. It is widely expected that Trump's approach to Europe will, at the very least, accelerate and intensify trends that have long been at play. For one, the US will be much more selectively engaged in Europe, as their core interests lie elsewhere and will likely be reviewed to reduce commitments abroad or negotiate better deals with allies. For another, consequently, the Europeans will need to take on much more responsibility for their security and the US will be much less supportive if they do not. Overall, the Trump administration is likely to see Europeans not as partners of choice but as occasional partners, relevant depending on the situation and in so far as they can deliver.

The potential impact of Trump's election on Europe and the transatlantic partnership should be assessed at different levels. First, on the politico-security front, the impact will depend on whether or not, and how, President Trump will carry out the foreign policy priorities he outlined in the course of the campaign. These apparently include, among others, working on a deal with Russia to join forces against terrorism (while leaving it ambiguous whether the US would accept a freer hand of Moscow in Eastern Europe, beyond NATO/EU borders), and re-opening the nuclear deal with Iran or simply walking away from it. Developments on both dossiers are highly uncertain, not least because there appears to be a tension between these policy goals. An exclusive focus on fighting ISIS in Syria in cooperation with Russia would entail fighting on the same side of Iranian and Iranian-backed forces in this theatre, while Moscow is unlikely to approve of a shift in US policy to put pressure on Iran regarding the nuclear file and other regional issues. Be as it may, steps to reset relations with Russia, including a recognition of Moscow's sphere of influence in Eastern Europe, or moves to undermine the nuclear deal with Iran, would likely lead to both deeper divisions within the EU and turbulence in transatlantic relations. Second, on the economic front, Trump has consistently voiced opposition to large trade deals and his intention to either scrap or renegotiate them. The TTIP between the US and the EU was not a campaign subject but difficulties on both sides on key negotiation issues preceded Trump's election. In the new context, prospects for advancing negotiations on a large deal addressing tariff and non-tariff issues across the board seem close to nil.

That said, Europe's importance for America's prosperity and security will likely weigh on the choices and priorities of the president-elect once he takes office. In economic terms, the transatlantic partnership is by far the widest and deepest in the world. Europe and the US are each other's number one trading partners, with trade in goods amounting to EUR 620 billion and trade in services to a staggering EUR 390 billion in 2015.⁵⁷ What is distinctive about the transatlantic economy is the sheer volume of mutual investment and the interconnection between investment and trade in services.⁵⁸ In 2014, the stock of EU investment in the US amounted to EUR 1,985.3 billion and American investment in Europe stood at EUR 1,810.8 billion. According to the European Commission, US investment in Europe is three times higher than in the whole of Asia, and EU investment in the US is eight times larger than in China and India combined. An estimated 15 million jobs depend on the EU-US economic relationship, on either side of the Atlantic. This is a relationship of such magnitude and importance for both sides that it will have to be handled with care.

On the security front, transatlantic cooperation on transnational security threats, including terrorism and organised crime, is critical to the security of the partners. When it comes to NATO, while Europeans will face a big pressure to step up their game in defence and security affairs, the value of the Alliance needs to be appreciated beyond a narrow, short-term calculation of respective costs. NATO has been a cornerstone of the American grand strategy for decades. The centrality and focus of the Alliance is subject to debate and change, as is the case for any institution. It is clear that the US will want to put more responsibility on the Europeans in taking care of their own security. However, an abrupt disengagement from the Alliance or moves signalling waning American commitment to it would affect the credibility of the US as a security provider worldwide. This would be problematic even from a realist perspective, unless the purpose is to withdraw into sheer isolationism. Besides, withdrawing from Europe would deprive the US of a critical platform for operations in the Middle East and Africa and would simply weaken the US hand in negotiations with Russia. Conversely, an approach towards Russia that combines a restated commitment to NATO and a renewed dialogue with Moscow to de-escalate tensions and explore how to manage differences is likely to find considerable support in Europe.

On a third level of assessment, while the US has always pragmatically pursued close dialogue and cooperation with both member states and the EU, the new Trump administration may prefer to deal with national capitals over Brussels. A de-emphasising of the EU-US partnership, within the broader framework of relations between Europe and the US, may well be in the cards. The EU has been conspicuously absent from candidate Trump's foreign policy horizon, which is not uncommon in US presidential elections. However, when Trump referred to the EU in the aftermath of the referendum on Brexit, it was to predict that it would break up.⁵⁹ President Trump and his cabinet may find that dealing with the EU actually matters a lot, not only on a number of economic and regulatory issues, but also when it comes to dealing with transnational threats. However, Trump has endorsed what he sees as the will of the people to 'take their country back', to have independence and to reassert borders, and has expressed the expectation that this will be the case not only in the UK but in various other countries. This leads one to assume that the president-elect has at least very little consideration for the project, and purpose, of European integration.

This points to a fourth level of assessment, namely the two systemic challenges that the Trump administration may pose to Europe. For one, realist and Jacksonian thinking, as well as Trump's own rhetoric, express a mix of reluctance and suspicion when it comes to international institutions and multilateral engagement. This is likely to seriously affect the EU's multilateral agenda. Trump's overt opposition to the Paris agreement on climate change and his expressed commitment to withdraw funding from the UN climate change programmes is only the most vivid example. The US commitment to fulfil the Sustainable Development Goals may be weak at best. Likewise, Europe's attempts to promote a global dialogue and cooperation to deal with migration and refugee issues are unlikely to find a very open interlocutor in Washington, except for stopping or severely curtailing these flows.

For another, Trump's political discourse and agenda builds on instincts and principles that are in opposition to those at the core of European integration. Trump has expressed a fiercely nationalist message and European integration is fundamentally about overcoming exclusive, folk-based nationalism. Above all else (and surely multilateral constraints), Trump seems to value American national sovereignty, and the EU is about partially sharing sovereignty in a rule-based framework to advance the common interest. In some of his most disturbing statements on dealing with terrorism and migration, Trump has showed little regard for those human rights that the EU is supposed to stand up for. He has so far put the emphasis on building barriers to trade and walls to stop migrants, while the EU has been mostly about pulling down barriers within Europe and beyond.

To be sure, the EU is far from matching the ideal type described above. Internal and external challenges have driven Europeans to take a much more realist approach to challenges such as that of migration, and to de-emphasise the value-driven component of their agenda towards the neighbourhood. The Trump administration may also prove more moderate in practice than the president-elect's discourse has suggested so far. But the differences between Trump's political outlook and the EU's founding principles are potentially consequential. As Freedman notes with reference to US allies at large, "The challenge for the allies will be to accept that this is a man who has reached power by denouncing much that they hold dear."⁶⁰

Concluding remarks: business not as usual

The overview of Donald Trump's foreign policy positions and priorities, as outlined during the campaign, and of the political and strategic debates surrounding and framing them, suggests that the change of guard in the White House will mark a paradigm shift in US foreign policy. The magnitude of this shift will depend on the actual foreign policy practice of the new administration, which will in turn be affected by a range of domestic and international factors, many of which are unpredictable. Uncertainty engulfs therefore the implications of this paradigm shift for international affairs, and for Europe in particular. That said, three final reflections can be made at this stage.

First, Obama has tried to chart a difficult middle course between the strategy of deep US global engagement pursued by earlier US administrations, and one of retrenchment driven by a narrow definition of American national interests. In doing so, he has attracted criticism from both camps. Trump's foreign policy is likely to bring about a major swing from the former approach to the latter. A degree of continuity can be observed between some aspects of Obama's foreign policy and Trump's likely approach. Elements of continuity include the aim to focus on domestic issues, to distinguish between vital US national interests and others, and to extricate the US from complex crises and conflicts in the Middle East (while focusing on fighting terrorism). However, the two leaders are driven by completely different ideas about domestic and international politics, which means that the ways in which these goals will be pursued is likely to be very different. Besides, they diverge on a number of other foreign policy priorities, from climate change and trade issues to relations with traditional US allies. While Obama undertook incremental shifts in US foreign policy without questioning the broad parameters that have informed it for decades, Trump has been challenging those very parameters.

If the president-elect matches words with deeds, the transition from Obama to Trump will entail a shift from a focus on partnerships and multinational cooperation to one on transactional relationships; from associating US interests to the preservation of the international liberal order to questioning the correlation between the two; from a targeted, incremental approach to dealing with challenges and threats to one that is both more selective and potentially much more drastic; and from a belief in the value of democratic and liberal values in international affairs (even if mediated by power and interest considerations) to a firmly interest-driven foreign policy approach.

Second, there is a clear risk that foreign policy increasingly becomes a derivate, or a victim, of ever more partisan domestic politics. Foreign policy starts at home on two levels. On the one hand, external influence depends at least in part on power assets such as a strong national economy, a vibrant and dynamic society, and investment in a robust military. On the other, if public opinion grows disenchanted with an internationalist approach that seems to deliver diminishing returns for people at home, foreign engagement may run out of fuel. As it increasingly occurs on both sides of the Atlantic, the 2016 electoral campaign in the US has pitted 'insiders' like Clinton, against perceived or self-proclaimed 'outsiders' such as Trump, who lead the charge against the 'system'. While this political fracture is widening, the line between foreign policy and domestic politics is blurring. Foreign policy and strategic affairs used to be the preserve of a professional establishment that could operate at a relative distance from the fray of party politics, seeking to build a national consensus on key, durable interests and priorities. Whether in the US or Europe, the political space for that is shrinking fast, which will likely in turn reduce the scope for negotiations and compromise on the international stage.

Third, Donald Trump's election entails two main sets of implications for Europe. For one, a lot will depend on the actual policies of the new administration on key issues ranging from Russia and Iran to trade and climate change. It is in the interest of EU member states to work much harder on joint positions to enter a constructive dialogue with the US or cope with the consequences of US decisions they disagree with. If the relationship is to become more transactional, then Europe should equip itself to use its critical mass to achieve more political and strategic autonomy and, on that basis, work pragmatically with the American partner. That will be a condition for both recognition and effectiveness. This requires in particular more investment in common security and defence, developing a post-TTIP trade strategy, and renewed leadership on global governance issues, including climate and development.⁶¹

For another, the electoral campaign has exposed deeper currents in US politics. Just like in Europe, there is a trend towards political polarisation, driven by populism, resentment towards so-called elites, and ultimately fear of change and uncertainty.⁶² Trump's political agenda finds enthusiastic supporters among the Eurosceptic forces on the rise in a number of EU member states. It is impossible to anticipate whether the new president and his administration will openly back these forces. However, the implication is that President Trump may well pose a challenge to European integration, if not by design, by example. His priorities on a number of issues, as expressed in the course of the electoral campaign, compound the political narrative of the populist and illiberal forces that aim to pull their countries out of the EU, dismantle it, or fundamentally alter it from within. To be sure, whether these forces will prevail depends less on Trump's message or policies than on the ability of European leaders to reject nationalist reflexes, find common ground, pull resources where needs be, and articulate a narrative putting cohesion and solidarity at the core of European integration. What is clear is that President Trump will confront Europeans with important questions on what they stand for and what they want to achieve together, at home and abroad. This is not going to be business as usual.

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