America First: Trump and the Multi-Order

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Around the world, the election of Donald Trump as 45th President of the United States has led to uncertainty and questions about future US foreign policy. These doubts focus on the role of the US as a mainstay of the liberal international order and as the guarantor of the security of America's allies, in both Europe and Asia. They are mainly prompted by statements made by the president-elect during the election campaign. Under the slogans ‘America first’ and ‘Making America great again’, that campaign suggested a commitment to hard American self-interest in Trump's foreign policy vision. The outside world was mainly depicted as an assortment of profiteers who acting under the banner of free trade and allied solidarity left the US to pick up the bill. Coupled with Trump's harsh tone towards China and conciliatory noises towards Vladimir Putin's Russia, this has generated considerable concern in Western liberal and European circles in particular. Is Trump's arrival the prelude to a further chilling of international relations, with the post-war liberal international order as the first victim?

Such a fear is vividly articulated by Patrick Stewart, who writes in response to Trump's election:

“Among its many implications, Donald Trump’s election as president calls into question the open liberal international order this country has championed and defended for more than seven decades. The edges of that order were already fraying, thanks to disenchantment with the global economy and the return of geopolitical competition, particularly with Russia and China. Trump's triumph will accelerate its disintegration, by undermining the network of rules, institutions, and alliances that twelve presidents, Republican and Democratic alike, have nurtured since 1945. The results of the election suggest that the main threats to the liberal world order are no longer foreign but domestic.”

The central question in this epilogue is what effects the new president may have on the international order. At first sight, statements made by Trump during and after the election campaign give ample reason to expect a dramatic change in US foreign policy after 20 January 2017. At the same time, this ‘Trump doctrine’ should be explicitly placed within a broader context: alongside all the uncertainty about the policy agenda, continuity can be expected in US policy as well as restrictions on US actions in a complex international order. Finally, in light of these restrictions, this contribution discusses some future expectations.

**Radical change?**

Terminating or abandoning multilateral treaties and agreements was and is central to Trump’s vision of how America can best defend its interests. This applies to the Paris Climate Agreement, the agreement on the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), the agreement on Iran’s nuclear facilities and the thaw in relations with Cuba initiated under president Obama. Along similar lines, there is the threat to hit China with protectionist measures and to embark on a renegotiation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in order to tax Mexican products more heavily.

Candidate Trump also criticised the relationship with America’s allies – both its partners in the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and its allies in Asia. ‘The US cannot afford to be the world’s police,’ he said during the first presidential debate on 26 September. In the same breath he declared that the allies should contribute more towards their own defence. The latter was a recurring theme, with not just the NATO partners but also Japan and South Korea being urged to invest more in their own defence, including the suggestion that the latter two countries would do well to develop their own nuclear weapons. Candidate Trump also raised doubts about America’s willingness to assist allies in the event of an attack, by suggesting that countries that failed to contribute enough to their own defence could no longer rely on US protection; with such a stance, he called into question the core of, among other things, NATO – in particular the mutual assistance obligation of Article 5 of the Washington Treaty.

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On this point, President-Elect Trump announced in the publication on 21 November of his plans for the first 100 days of his presidency that no further part would be taken in the negotiations on the Trans-Pacific Partnership.
The effects of one man

Does the foregoing mean that US foreign policy under Donald Trump will be characterised by a radical break with the past? Such a conclusion seems premature. After all the campaign rhetoric, a great deal of uncertainty remains about future US foreign policy. It can be expected that the outlines of that policy will only become apparent in the course of 2017. However, the rhetoric has created greater uncertainty about American foreign policy this time than with previous transitions.

A number of points should be borne in mind when considering what policy towards the world is to be expected: the checks and balances within the American political system and the international order; the nostalgic paradigm in which the United States is presented as a ‘benevolent hegemon’; and finally the expected continuity with the ‘Jacksonian’ tradition in US foreign policy.

To start with, experience of previous transitions has shown that, rhetoric aside, a genuine break with predecessors’ policies rarely occurs. Like previous presidents, Trump faces a system of checks and balances within the American political system and the reality of the world around America; these things will limit his foreign policy options, for instance with regard to the unilateral termination of treaties. A second factor relates to the composition of the inner circle of those responsible for everyday policy in consultation with the president. The main figures here are the White House Chief of Staff, the National Security Advisor, the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense and the Director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). The first appointments point towards a preference for hard-liners, especially as regards the risk of Islamic terrorism, with little experience of international affairs. In addition, it is questionable to what extent foreign policy will be a top priority for the new president. The first signs indicate the importance of the domestic agenda, in which economic growth, energy and infrastructure are the key concerns. The relationship between these items and the foreign policy agenda is primarily to do with climate, migration and free trade, not diplomacy and security. At the same time, in view of the various crises within the international system it can in any case be assumed that these latter aspects will nevertheless require attention. The US simply cannot afford to withdraw from the international system. The only question is what stance it will take under Trump’s presidency in the event of a crisis or development that directly affects America.

It should be remembered here that Donald Trump’s America must take account of the fact that the US is closely interlinked with the international system and that this affects the room for manoeuvre within US foreign policy. First, the US does not operate in a vacuum, but is dependent on the actions of other parties – whether these be Kim Jong-un’s North Korea, Vladimir Putin’s Russia or President Xi Jinping’s China. In addition, in an interdependent world certain measures may prove harmful to the US itself. This is particularly true of trade and capital. US businesses are also part of the globalised value chains and thus dependent on parts and components from other
regions of the world, including China and Mexico. Protectionist measures against these countries will therefore have serious negative consequences for parts of the American business community. The US government is also vulnerable in this respect, with a national debt which is partly funded by other countries, including China. A tit-for-tat reaction in which China stops purchasing US Treasury bonds could cause problems for the US economy and government, due among other things to rising interest costs.³

With regard to the notion of a substantive break with previous US foreign policy, it should also be noted that the primacy of US interests has been taken as a fundamental principle by almost every post-war president, together with the willingness to use military means if necessary.⁴ If foreign policy under Donald Trump is characterised by reticence concerning the global leadership of the US, this will moreover be consistent with a trend towards greater restraint or selectiveness on the part of the US that has already been in evidence for some time. President Obama’s policy of ‘strategic patience’ and ‘no boots on the ground’, which was partly prompted by the failed interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, exemplifies this. Incidentally, it was argued in some quarters that this policy undermined the credibility of American security guarantees or support for ‘friendly’ regimes.⁵ Here too, candidate Trump’s pronouncements that America should no longer be willing to act as the world’s policeman are an indication of continuity, if anything.

A similar sense of proportion is appropriate when considering the consequences of Donald Trump’s presidency for the liberal international order. The image of America as the mainstay of that order is based on a depiction of affairs that is inconsistent with the reality of America’s actions in recent decades. It is most applicable to the early post-war period, when the US functioned to a large extent as an architect first and foremost of the liberal international economic order and was prepared to assume a disproportionate share of responsibility for security in Western Europe and the Far East; it did so, incidentally, from a sound appreciation of its own interests. As early as the 1960s, however, the US was displaying its willingness to act unilaterally if that liberal order no longer served America’s interests. The unilateral termination of dollar-gold parity in 1971, ushering in the de facto end of the post-war Bretton Woods system of fixed exchange rates, is an example that underlines how benevolent American economic leadership is already a thing of the distant past. However, this also applies to security, human rights and diplomacy, where the US has, when necessary, shown a complete disregard for the premises of the liberal international order by supporting authoritarian regimes, ignoring

⁴ The most notable exception was the presidency of Jimmy Carter (1977-1981), who operated in the ‘Wilsonian tradition’ of US foreign policy.
the United Nations, undertaking unilateral interventions, using drones, refusing to sign up to the International Criminal Court and so on. This is inherent to the actions of great powers in an anarchic world order, but must also be taken into account when defining expectations for the future, especially if the world order is not expected to become any friendlier. In this respect too, Donald Trump seems rather to represent the continuation of an existing approach, with perhaps – although this is true of every president – some changes of emphasis in certain areas.

Third, to the extent that it is possible at this stage to speak of a Trump Doctrine for US foreign policy, such a doctrine would seem to reflect the ‘Jacksonian tradition’ named after the seventh US President, Andrew Jackson (1829–1837). In this tradition, America’s own interests come first. Those interests must be promoted from a position of strength, and the US should not be dependent on others. Foreign policy conducted along these lines is isolationist in the sense that the US is supposed to refrain from intervention in the rest of the world, on the grounds that it is not America’s role or responsibility to exert global leadership out of moral considerations. This approach is thus diametrically opposed to the Wilsonian tradition, which ascribes a leading role to the US, especially in spreading democracy, human rights and self-determination throughout the world. In the Jacksonian approach, intervention to promote these universal values is out of the question. Only if US interests are directly at stake should there be any intervention, which should then be as hard-hitting as possible. Military power and the capacity to deploy it without restraint where necessary is thus an integral part of this doctrine.

Donald Trump reflects the Jacksonian tradition in his vision of US foreign policy on a number of points. The primacy of American self-interest under the slogan ‘America first’, stepping back from the multilateral system, the aversion to America’s role as global policeman, and the ‘businesslike’ approach to international diplomacy, not driven by ideological or moral considerations, fit seamlessly into this tradition. The announced plans to invest more in US defence, protection against cyberattacks and homeland security (including the rejection of certain categories of migrants) also point to a foreign policy orientation. Under this orientation, ‘Fortress America’ operates further away from the world stage, but the US has the ability to hit back hard at any time if vital American interests are at stake.

Developments and changes of emphasis in the multi-order

Given that much is still unclear about foreign policy under Trump, what are the most likely developments and changes of emphasis? In the multi-order – the global chessboard of various policy fields – the effects will vary.\(^8\) Roughly speaking, there are three expected effects. In a number of policy areas significant changes are expected; in some areas there will be continuity; and in a last group of areas there is above all a great deal of uncertainty.

Changes. The most direct effects are likely to be apparent in the fields of trade, climate and energy, where the US will seek to withdraw from multilateral agreements. To the extent that it reaches agreements – in particular with regard to trade – it will do so under the hub-and-spoke model, i.e. a system of bilateral agreements in which the United States is best-placed to exploit its own dominant position.

A second effect lies in the field of security and diplomacy. Given the expressed desire to increase the US defence budget and modernise the nuclear capacity, arms control will not be a priority for the new US administration. On the contrary, non-proliferation agreements will come under pressure, partly due to the possible cancellation of the agreement with Iran.

A third effect concerns the EU itself. The main effect of the arrival of Trump in the short term is that populist parties will believe they can gain a boost from his election victory; this factor should not be underestimated in 2017 as a European election year. More substantial is the risk that as the EU grows weaker, the US will take its European partners even less seriously; this tendency will be all the more pronounced if the EU mainly seeks to occupy the moral high ground.

Continuity. In the fields of security and diplomacy there is a wide range of issues – some of them interconnected – of which the most urgent is the Middle East. Despite all the talk about taking a tough approach to Islamic State (IS), it is unlikely that the US under Trump will modify the existing strategy of air strikes and will proceed to a large-scale intervention with ground troops. Instead, Russia will be given space to drive the opposition, including IS, further into a corner in cooperation with President Assad of Syria, in the hope that this will eventually create the conditions for a diplomatic solution or for the stabilisation of the region. More generally, the US under Trump will form closer ties with authoritarian regimes (including Egypt and Saudi Arabia) in the Middle East and North Africa; this development further underlines the subordinate significance

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attributed to moral considerations in this policy. It is also unlikely that the US will take an active role in the peace process between Israel and the Palestinians. One uncertain element here is the future relationship between America and Turkey.

A change is of course also unlikely with regard to tackling global terrorism. The new administration will prefer to conduct this fight remotely, using drones and special forces, and will be wary of adventures along the lines of Afghanistan or Iraq. Even more emphasis will be placed on homeland security and the work of the intelligence services.

With the free-trade agreement TTIP out of the picture, relations with the EU/Europe will be determined even more strongly by relations between the US and Russia. It is highly unlikely that the US will pull back from its commitments to its allies in NATO. On the other hand, pressure on the European NATO partners to raise their defence spending will increase further. More important, however, will be the development of the relationship between the US and Russia. Given that the softening or lifting of economic sanctions is in Russia’s interest and Trump has shown understanding and sympathy for Vladimir Putin, the possibility cannot be excluded that – in part too because the US needs cooperation with Russia in some areas – this will result in an agreement on the ‘post-Crimean’ geopolitical order in Europe, the essence of which will be a neutral, non-aligned status for the region between the EU/NATO and Russia. In other words, this will involve the ‘self-Finlandisation’ of countries such as Ukraine. This would fit with the trend noted in this Monitor for the principle of territorial integrity to come under pressure and for spheres of influence to gain in importance within the system of great powers.

Uncertainty. This brings us to the all-important relationship with China. The Obama administration wavered in this area between a policy of rapprochement and strategic containment. The signals coming from candidate Trump pointed to a tough stance towards China, particularly on trade. At the same time he left room for doubt about the US security guarantees to America’s allies in the region. This makes the future US-China relationship the most uncertain within the world system. Given the importance of this relationship, this poses a risk.

**Conclusion**

The new US administration will operate in a world that is changing. American actions under Trump will increase this momentum. Wherever the US leaves room for doubt about its obligations to its allies, other parties such as Russia, China and Iran will take advantage. Wherever America pulls back, these parties will leap in. As far as Europe is concerned, this means that it must hope for a US foreign policy based on strength, an eye to its partners’ interests and cooperation.
Finally, when asked by a journalist what is the most disruptive factor for a country’s foreign policy, the former British prime minister and foreign minister Harold Macmillan replied: ‘Events, dear boy, events’. Like any other leader, Donald Trump will be affected by ‘events’ in the form of international crises sooner than he would choose. Given his unpredictability and demonstrable lack of self-control, this is perhaps the biggest uncertainty on the eve of his presidency: how will he react as the most powerful man in the world?