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Predicting the Unpredictable: Trump's Foreign Policy 2.0

By Lawrence Anderson

SYNOPSIS

Donald Trump will assume office as the 47th President of the United States on 20 January. However, doubts remain over his unstable and unpredictable disposition and what this will mean for US foreign policy.

COMMENTARY

US media outlets have persistently caricatured Donald Trump as unstable and unpredictable, as well as blaming him for many of the world's problems. Trump's utterances are often insulting and crude, but they are mostly regarded as intentionally provocative to secure transactions to "Make America Great Again". This commentary will examine what the incoming President will try to achieve concerning his promises to end the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, management of relations with China and ASEAN and recent remarks on Greenland, the Panama Canal and Canada after he assumes office on 20 January.

Ukraine

Trump had promised to end the war in Ukraine. His electoral victory underscores the need for the EU to rethink its policy toward the war, whether it can find the consensus to readjust its domestic social agenda to cope with the competing demands from increased US pressure on trade-related issues and to scale up its assistance to Ukraine.

From Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's perspective, outlined in his speech on 2 January, a "just peace" would require Ukraine to maintain a strong military, security guarantees from its Western allies, and the country's future membership in NATO and the EU. Putin is unlikely to agree to this as the main reason for his invasion

was to prevent Ukraine from joining NATO. Despite Trump's much-touted fondness of Putin, much will depend on how hard he is prepared to push in navigating the distrust between the West and Ukraine on the one hand and Russia on the other.

Reports suggest that Trump is considering delaying Ukraine's NATO membership by at least 20 years, making up for this by continuing to supply it with arms. Incoming Vice President J D Vance has also indicated that Trump might insist that Ukraine cede the regions controlled by Russia and agree to a demilitarised zone.

For Trump, the challenges will be twofold: overcoming domestic resistance to concessions to Russia and navigating the minefield of competing interests. A cessation of hostilities will not be satisfactory to either of the protagonists and may be temporary at best. A lasting resolution of the conflict will demand more than quick fixes or bold proclamations.

The Middle East

Israel's decisive strikes against Hamas, Hezbollah and Iran and the recent acquisition of a security buffer in Syria have altered the political-security landscape in the Middle East. It has a good opportunity to shape outcomes in its favour, especially with Trump having promised his all-out support.

Hawks in Tel Aviv and Washington have called for the US to attack Iran's nuclear facilities. However, Trump is not expected to do so as this will require the active cooperation of key European and Arab partners, particularly Saudi Arabia. An attack risks plunging the region into a major war without any certainty that all of Iran's nuclear facilities will be destroyed. Therefore, Trump would likely negotiate an agreement that would also freeze Iran's nuclear programme, especially since the latter has signalled its readiness to resume nuclear talks. Given the high stakes involved, Trump will only go to war if there is evidence that Iran persists in crossing the nuclear threshold, but the mullahs are realistic about their prospects.

A deal is possible, and the US and Iran would prefer to reach an agreement, however imperfect. This would buy time for Washington to replenish its depleted stocks of weapons and equipment to serve Israel as well. For Iran, it can be expected to pursue its nuclear programme surreptitiously as that is its only guarantee for regime survival.

China and The Indo-Pacific

Trump will face an Indo-Pacific that has undergone leadership changes. Last year, the region witnessed new leaders in Taiwan, Japan, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Vietnam, Singapore and Thailand. How he will react to proposals coming out of Asia and the ongoing turmoil in South Korea will affect regional stability and prosperity. For instance, how will Trump respond to Japan's proposal for an "Asian version of NATO", knowing it is bound to provoke a sharp response from China, North Korea and Russia? Will he react positively or use it as a bargaining chip to pressure China and North Korea?

Most analysts predict that US-China rivalry will increase with Trump in the White House, but conflict is not inevitable. Trump and President Xi Jinping have made

politically correct noises about working together to address shared global concerns. “Red lines” over the Taiwan issue and stringent curbs on strategic sectors and dual-use technologies are deeply embedded and not likely to change beyond minor adjustments.

We can also expect Trump to demand greater alignment with Washington from its friends and allies. On the positive side, progress in reducing the sizeable US trade deficit, fentanyl imports, and tensions over North Korea’s involvement in Ukraine is possible with diplomacy and a willingness to adjust mindsets. For instance, during his election campaign last October, Trump boasted that his threats to raise tariffs had persuaded China to abandon its plans to build a sizeable an electric vehicle (EV) plant in Mexico. What if Chinese leaders offered to build the factory in the US instead and sell the cars produced in the US market? This would be a win-win situation for both countries – more jobs for American workers and EV market access for China.

A Chinese commitment to seriously dealing with the fentanyl scourge would significantly improve China’s image among Americans, the administration, and its prospects in negotiating concessions on other issues.

ASEAN

ASEAN is bracing itself for a spike in the US-China competition. There is much concern that Trump’s promise to impose steep tariffs will have repercussions, particularly on Chinese investments in ASEAN member states for goods that eventually end up in the US.

Market access remains a key consideration for ASEAN. However, the US withdrew from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) under the first Trump administration. The second Trump administration is unlikely to view the revised Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) or Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) favourably either. It is also not expected to embrace its predecessor’s Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF) initiative.

As ASEAN navigates the shoals of tariffs and threats, it is imperative that the grouping explore concrete ways to strengthen its economic links with the US. America is ASEAN’s second-largest trading partner and the largest source of FDI. Washington has stressed its support for ASEAN Centrality and claims it will not force ASEAN to take its side against China. Still, the pressure to do so will likely increase under the Trump administration. ASEAN remains pivotal to US and China’s interests, but ASEAN member states must be nimble and adept in leveraging their collective interests amidst US-China competition.

Greenland, Panama and Canada

In recent days, arguing based on considerations of “economic security”, Trump has offered to purchase Greenland from Denmark, showing a lack of respect for the sovereignty of a treaty ally, and threatened to act against Panama for supposedly allowing China to operate the Panama Canal. Trump also warned that he would not rule out using military force or economic coercion to achieve his aims. Earlier, he had been equally disdainful in inviting Canada to join America as its 51st state, arguing

that the boundary between the two countries was artificially drawn and blaming Canada for its trade deficit and the flow of illegal immigrants and fentanyl into America.

Trump's remarks harked back to an era of US imperialism and were widely repudiated by many, including the Danish, Panamanian and Canadian governments. But there may be method to his madness. Greenland is rich in rare earths and other natural resources, besides being strategically positioned to challenge the presence of Russia and China in the Arctic. Lucrative revenues can also be derived from operating the Panama Canal. In the case of Canada, it supplies 99 per cent of US natural gas imports and 60 per cent of its oil imports. If Trump succeeds in getting what he wants, it will strengthen US control of the North American and the Arctic sea lanes while checking China and Russia's inroads into these areas.

Can Trump's expansionist ambitions succeed in the face of global objection, including from Russia, which considers the Arctic critical to its interests? These developments have been very recent, so it is too early to predict. However, given Trump's penchant for making loud threats, we can expect him to succeed in at least extracting some lucrative concessions from the three countries.

Conclusion

Trump has a sizeable electoral mandate to effect changes within the US and its foreign policy unless he squanders it through his hubris and wild ideas. He hit the ground running, selected a group of trusted officials and advisers, and interacted early with key allies, prompting some political analysts to observe that he is probably the best-prepared incoming resident of the White House. To what extent he can revitalise America's global position and image in the face of significant domestic and international challenges remains to be seen.

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