Foreign Policy in the Trump Administration

February 2, 2017
Over the past several months, FP Analytics spoke with more than 60 foreign policy experts, including former cabinet secretaries and appointees and advisors of the Trump administration, to get their views on the future direction of foreign policy. What follows in a synthesis of those interviews, relying primarily on individuals close to the transition and key national security appointees for insights into likely policies, and the broader community of foreign policy experts for a view on the risks and opportunities associated with what is certain to be the greatest departure from traditional U.S. foreign policy in recent history.

U.S. Leadership in the World

There is substantial divergence in positions on specific issues within the Trump camp, but interviews demonstrated a set of core ideas that are broadly shared and will shape how the new administration engages globally. First and foremost is a rejection of both Bush era adventurism and the perceived weakness of the Obama era. Strength, rather than leadership, is the primary goal, driven by a belief not only that it has been woefully eroded, but also that its return is dependent on the revitalization of the U.S. economy. As a campaign advisor and now White House official put it, “We will engage in peace through strength by rebuilding our military and focusing on the Chinese concept of comprehensive national power. It’s the idea that in order to have a strong military, you have to have a strong economy.”

While the idea that strength at home translates to strength abroad is certainly not new, the centrality of economics in the understanding of diplomacy and geopolitical competition within the Trump White House is. With the exception of combatting terrorism, all of our relationships are defined primarily in economic terms. In this worldview, the perceptions of China as foe, and Russia as potential friend, are the direct outgrowths of the relative integration of their economies with our own.

It also informs the transactional, siloed approach to foreign policy challenges driven by a focus on dealmaking and a narrow view of U.S. interests that does not include our values. While that might work in real estate deals, experts warn that failing to account for the “connective tissue” that exists among issues could lead to policies with inherent internal contradictions and unintended consequences in high-risk areas — from Iran to North Korea.
It is also likely a factor in the apparent casualness with which the President has made statements that upend decades-long U.S. policies. Traditionally, the U.S. President weighing in personally on a foreign policy issue is a very carefully deployed tool, particularly if it signals a change in stance. Advisors note that is no longer the case, asserting, “You can change some things about what you said, and that’s fine because you were just positioning for the deal.” This seems likely to produce an unstable cocktail — a more extreme version of the retrenchment we saw under Obama, paired with unnecessarily aggressive postures — ripe for miscalculation and conflict.

It also introduces unpredictability into the system, as Trump and his closest advisors believe that keeping both allies and friends guessing can produce a better deal. This could very well deliver short-term tactical wins, but as one veteran Republican foreign policy thinker noted, “It’s a great advantage if you’re a disruptor. The drawbacks tend to outweigh the advantages when you are the rule setter of the international order because predictability allows your allies to reinforce your efforts, allows norms to develop that undergird your decisions and reduce the cost of maintaining order.”

In fact, the nationalist rhetoric the propelled Trump into office is anchored in a failure to appreciate the benefits accrued to the U.S. from that order. As a former Undersecretary of State put it,

“There is a risk that Trump does not fully understand why the institutions that were created, primarily in the 1940s and 1950s, were so critical to the success of the United States from a political, from a national security, and from an economic point of view. One of the reasons America has been so successful is that it created not just a strong economy at home, but strong alliances, strong international institutions, strong international principles that were supportive of America’s broader global interests.”

**Leadership Team**

This appetite for disruption is centered in the White House with the President and National Security Advisor Michael Flynn and not shared by the key cabinet officials— Secretary of Defense James Mattis and Secretary of State nominee Rex Tillerson. Quite apart from the optics and implications of what one former Ambassador referred to as a “government of plutocrats and generals,” there are real questions around how these individuals with such disparate worldviews will work together and how the national security policymaking apparatus will be structured.
Traditionally, the National Security Advisor plays the central role in defining the policy objective and agenda, but Flynn’s ability to perform this function successfully is being questioned on multiple levels. In interviews, individuals with experience working with Flynn noted his effectiveness as an intelligence officer for most of his career, where his role as a disruptor challenging the conventional wisdom had real value. However, even were that approach appropriate to this new role, which they maintain it is not, his mismanagement of the Defense Intelligence Agency, embrace of conspiracy theories, and Islamophobia have led to questions about his overall fitness to take on what is considered one of the hardest jobs in government.

The focus on “wins” and the President’s demonstrated lack of interest in the more tedious aspects of governance have left those inside and outside the administration with the impression that there is likely to be a significant devolution of policymaking back to the cabinet agencies — a major (and positive) change from the Obama administration. But for those issues taken up by the White House, there is considerable uncertainty as to how decision-making will be managed. A senior State Department official from the Bush administration asked, “If he defines his role as National Security Advisor as freezing other points of view out to present only his, then that will create genuine problems for our policy.”

The consensus among experts was that should conflict arise, short of a loss of confidence, Flynn would likely have the ear of the President. “Trump is keeping people whose views reflect his own closest to him, and I think they will likely be determinative, that they will override the effect of Tillerson and Mattis.” However, they also note how unacceptable that is likely to be to both. “When you’ve got Tillerson and Mattis as your two principals, clearly Flynn is the junior of the people there.” Mattis is not only a four star to Flynn’s three, he is widely respected and has a far broader following within the defense community. Tillerson, for his part, is known for being extremely effective within an organization — ethical, deliberative, analytical, consultative. Individuals close to both suggested that Tillerson and Mattis would likely resign if they felt they could not be effective.

The center of gravity in national security should reveal itself in the coming months, as the structures of governance take shape and the administration is challenged by unexpected crises and strategic decisions. The decision to include controversial political advisor Steve Bannon on the NSC’s Principals Committee, while excluding the Director of National Intelligence and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff except on an issue specific basis, is considered a troubling early sign.

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Government Reform

Unlike Secretary Clinton, who arguably would have been the most experienced president to enter office, President Trump and his White House team have an unprecedented lack of government experience. Rather than a liability, the incoming administration views this as a strength — bringing “innovation, intelligence, and perspective” to policymaking. When asked whether one might be worried about a lag, as the key team members get up to speed with the functioning of government, one White House staff member asserted, “That’s not an issue. We know how it doesn’t work. We’re going to make it work.”

Some changes have already been undertaken, like the elevation of the position of Homeland Security Advisor to equal status and rank with the National Security Advisor. Observers also expect to see a shrinking of the NSC. It has become almost a statement of fact in Washington that the NSC staff has grown well beyond its useful size, absorbing functions more appropriate to the different agencies and in so doing, relinquishing its core mission. The hope is that this might be corrected early on in the new administration, as “It’s like flying a plane and trying to repair it mid-flight. Better to come in before the plane takes off and do what you need to do structurally so that it will fly and fly well.” This is also considered likely, given the lack of bench depth in an administration that is still refusing to hire foreign policy experts who actively opposed Trump.

Additionally, associates of Flynn suggest that he is interested in making some changes within the intelligence community, based on his perception that “managers within the IC are obviously not giving policymakers the perspective that line analysts working on varying issues are providing them.” This lines up with news reports of Flynn’s interest in limiting the role of the Director of National Intelligence and his loss of a permanent seat on the NSC’s Principals Committee.

The other expected, but still opaque, changes are: 1) a notable increase in the importance of economic statecraft to U.S. diplomacy; 2) a rebalancing of resources and power to increase defense spending at the expense of development and diplomacy; and 3) the elimination of certain offices and programs that are not in line with the administration’s agenda, although given the leadership styles of Tillerson and Mattis, this is expected to be considerably less dramatic than what has been announced at domestic agencies.
Relationship with Congress

Interviews with White House officials and informal advisors all point to tactical engagement with Congress on specific issues of shared interest, with the understanding that the Trump administration is likely to face resistance in advancing policies that depart from traditional Republican orthodoxy. Cooperation is likely to begin with tax reform, with a reduction in the corporate tax rate and a reduced corporate repatriation tax being key features. They also expect cooperation on lifting sequestration for the defense budget, but anticipate continued pushback on broader security issues already evidenced in actions taken to investigate Russian interference in the U.S. election and to block the lifting of sanctions.

A narrow majority of 52 to 48 gives outsize weight to those Republicans willing to challenge the White House. A conservative foreign policy scholar observed, “I think you’ll see people like John McCain and Lindsay Graham asserting a more independent position, and they have the leverage to do that, just because there’s no a lot of margin of error given the partisan composition.” Others noted the presidential ambitions of some members as well as pressure from the business community as factors that could drive opposition, particularly around trade policy. Conscious of this, an economic advisor to the President stated, “He’ll be as activist as Obama has been using executive authority. Whatever he can do at the executive level, he’ll do, and the rest of it will be done through negotiations.” This has already proven out, as the President issued a rushed series of executive orders and actions to fulfill or give the appearance of fulfilling his campaign promises.

First 100 Days

While the first days of his presidency have been defined by executive orders intended to fulfill, or give the perception of fulfilling, campaign promises around immigration and trade, the White House is expected to make counterterrorism the centerpiece of its foreign policy agenda in the first 100 days. A close associate of the National Security Advisor described the mindset:

“What are some things that I have said while running that I intend to achieve which are practical? What tools do I have available to do these things? When you look at counterterrorism, that’s low-hanging fruit. That’s easy. The American people will get behind that very quickly, and it would be very difficult for Congress to stand in the way of any effort to achieve a more rapid set of results that can stand to limit the capacity of a group like the Islamic State. It’s reasonable to anticipate that counterterrorism will be front and center and with a focus on generating a much higher tempo of a direct-action-oriented set of policies against the Islamic State and Iran.”

"He'll be as activist as Obama has been using executive authority"
### Meetings with Foreign Leaders in the First 100 Days

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- ★ White House/Stateside
- Overseas
In addition to stepping up the tempo of Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) activity, this focus on counterterrorism is expected to include a cyber initiative led by Tom Bossert in his capacity as Homeland Security Advisor. Bossert, who served Bush as Deputy Homeland Security Advisor, spent the Obama years leading the Atlantic Council’s Cyber Security Initiative. He is expected to focus on denying extremists “cyber sanctuary” rather than addressing the troubling cyber interference in the U.S. election, sponsored by Russia.

Consistent with past Presidents, Trump has already announced meetings with Canada and Israel, but the fracas over meeting with Mexico is a major break with tradition. A meeting with British Prime Minister Theresa May in his first week in office reinforces the Trump team’s view of the U.K. as our key ally in Europe. In addition to ending US participation in TPP, there is no indication of any initiative planned to firm up those critical relationships in Asia.

Priorities

There are two kinds of priorities for any president — those they choose, and those that are chosen for them. As described by one former George W. Bush cabinet secretary, “Nobody wants to be reactive, but you end up being reactive whether you like it or not. The world doesn’t let you off the hook.”

Along those lines, advisors and experts laid out a consistent set of challenges that the next president will likely face that will force him to set priorities, namely with respect to Russia, China, and Syria, as well as a possible collapse of Venezuela in the coming months. Responses to each of those challenges will be laid out later in this brief, but the overarching theme is a wholesale questioning of the conventional wisdom to arrive at better deals for the U.S.

Beyond those immediate challenges, the Trump administration is expected to put economic growth front and center, with tax reform viewed by economic advisors as the most promising early win, along with an infrastructure investment plan. On the international stage, advisors to the President vowed, “Negotiations will begin immediately with our allies in Asia and Europe on strengthening both the NATO and Asian alliances. That’s going to entail solid negotiations with the intent of making those alliances more viable.”

Where we are likely to see some real departures in policy is around “soft power” issues given importance by President Obama, including advancing women’s rights around the world as a catalyst for economic development and counter extremism and our commitment to human rights and democratic
ideals. While not going so far as to challenge the inherent value of these efforts, a range of individuals interviewed suggested that the incoming administration sees them as having been too central to the international dealings of the U.S. government and as a distraction from advancing our core interests.

Alliances

The area of greatest divergence between the President and his foreign policy advisors and cabinet members is on the treatment of our formal allies. As many observers point out, the issue is not the suggestion that our allies are not contributing enough — the Obama administration had been pushing NATO allies to up defense spending for years with some success. Trump is proposing something quite different by explicitly introducing the idea that the alliances are conditional on those contributions increasing. This is antithetical to the thinking of his national security team, who hope for a change in posture from the campaign. “Either he presses them, goes forward with the rationale that their defense budget will be the litmus test for whether we fulfill our Article 5 commitments or not.” Or, as a critic of the administration predicted, “It could be ‘America first,’ but it could also be ‘America only.’”

One area of clear agreement between Mattis and Flynn is on the vital importance of not just maintaining, but also strengthening these alliances. A Flynn advisor suggested his intention to deepen intelligence cooperation on counterterrorism via an increase in what the U.S. shares with our allies in Europe. Experts pointed out that while Trump might score some small wins, they will be dwarfed by the systemic risk introduced by this stance. “A lot of damage can be done by unwinding structures that have been in place for sixty or seventy years. You can undermine alliances, you can undermine institutions very quickly. Unless you have alternatives that are better, then you can be left with chaos and disorder.”

Europe

As the next administration enters office, it will face a fundamentally challenged Europe — weakened by a sluggish recovery from the global economic crisis, slow growth, high unemployment, and a move to the right, and distracted by Brexit, the refugee crisis, and an increasingly aggressive Russia. But as one former senior Department of Defense official put it, “Our economic and security position in the world depends on that partnership,” which is widely perceived to have been neglected by the Obama
Brexit further threatens the health of the alliance, as the UK has traditionally been our advocate within the EU. Described by a former senior State Department official and campaign advisor, “The UK was always the first point of entry for us to get a sense of the lay of the land, and to help coordinate and engage.” There is also a keen awareness of the risk to U.S. counterterrorism efforts as information-sharing and surveillance cooperation have largely been managed under the EU framework, rather than NATO, with the U.S. relying on the UK’s support and often at odds with Germany.

For their part, European leaders appear unsure of how to navigate a Trump presidency. “We’ve seen two potential approaches. Theresa May keeping her head down, trying not to draw fire. Angela Merkel publishing her scolding advice to Trump about our values. Neither is likely to prove successful.”

While his advisors and cabinet members appear committed to our relationship with Europe, the President does not seem to comprehend that “the unraveling of that relationship has broad social, economic, and stability implications, at a time when we need collaboration from everything from cyber security to immigration issues. This is not a time to be backing away from guaranteed allies.” Instead, Trump seems intent on deepening the “special relationship” with the UK and abandoning efforts to reinforce and broaden our cooperation and collaboration with our European partners. However, given the depth and breadth of support for NATO within the administration, he is unlikely to back away from our Article 5 commitments in the face of Russian aggression.

Russia

Contrary to the media narrative, advisors and outside experts do not believe there is a meaningful and lasting relationship with Putin. Advisors to the President acknowledge the risk to Europe, but they see Putin’s aggression as a point of leverage to get our European allies to pay their fair share for NATO. Outside experts point to three main risks: 1) that the Putin/Trump “honeymoon” will end as Putin will somehow insult or provoke Trump, leading to direct conflict; 2) that Putin could invade a Baltic state by miscalculating Trump’s willingness to honor Article 5; and 3) that Putin’s overall strategy was not to have a puppet in the White House, but to weaken the U.S. by helping elect an incompetent and unserious leader.

Whatever Russia’s intentions in their brazen interference in the U.S. election, the President is expected to pursue his current fascination with making a deal. Some White House staff and advisors share the belief in the potential for a “grand bargain.” A former ambassador, in discussions with the administration
over a position, suggested that an opportunity was emerging after the Obama administration. “That shoestring military has three major multiplier factors: nuclear weapons, the Security Council vote, which blocks international legal action, and the unwillingness of the United States to get involved. In Obama’s world, none of this matters. In Trump’s, we can make a deal.”

Others, again with an economic frame, see Russia crippled by sanctions and overextended in foreign commitments looking for a way out. While there were multiple variations of this “grand bargain” presented, the general contours are that they see Crimea as a fait accompli and think one could convince the Russians to abandon their relationship with Iran in exchange for a favorable settlement in Syria. Outside experts note that Poroshenko and Putin are caught in a frozen conflict, quite apart from the fate of Crimea, and that whatever Putin promises on Iran, he is unlikely to deliver, given how favorable that relationship is to Russian interests. They see any deal with Putin as likely to fail.

As a former State Department Middle East senior advisor put it, “Right now, the threat is not what Russia has done in the past, but is what Russia may likely do. The difference between China and Russia is that the Chinese at least have a vested interest in stability of the American economy. The Russians have no vested interest in anything with us.”

Middle East

The Trump administration will confront a Middle East in the throes of unprecedented upheaval — wars in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Libya; a rising Iran; rampant sectarian violence and terrorism; economic uncertainty in the region’s richest countries; and the unresolved Israel–Palestine dispute. Meanwhile, allies in the region harbor serious doubts about longstanding U.S. security guarantees; some even question Washington’s willingness to remain a key player in the region.

Trump has voiced unqualified support for Israel, has expressed an openness to strongmen leaders in Egypt and Turkey, has criticized the Iran nuclear accord, and has vowed to crush Islamic State fighters, yet neither he nor his national security team have presented a unified strategic vision or coherent set of views on the region. Secretary of Defense James Mattis favors a more assertive response to Iran, which he sees as the greatest danger in the Middle East. National Security Advisor Flynn regards terrorism as the biggest threat. Trump views Russia, Syria, and even Iran as potential allies in the fight to defeat Islamic State, as does Secretary of State nominee Rex Tillerson. There are tensions over other issues: Trump wants to tear up
the Iran nuclear accord; Mattis wants the U.S. to rigorously enforce it; and Tillerson says he still wants to review it. And while Trump and Mattis agree on a more aggressive strategy to drive Islamic State fighters from Mosul, their last bastion in Iraq, Trump has not signed off on Mattis’s call for an lengthy American military presence in Iraq after Mosul is retaken or a similarly aggressive strategy to take Raqqa, Syria, the capital of the Islamic State. Such conflicting views have the potential for deep discord in the new administration.

Islamic State and Countering Violent Extremism

With Trump aligning with Flynn over the threat from extremists, the fight against Islamic State and similar groups is expected to be a top priority for the incoming administration. There are no substantive differences with the Obama administration on strategy. That means continued close intelligence coordination with friendly governments to track suspected terrorists; the use of warplanes and killer drones to target terrorist leaders and destroy their hideouts; and the continued use of Special Operations forces to train the militaries of African, Asian, and Middle Eastern countries to confront terrorist threats. “If you think about Mike Flynn, who comes out of the Joint Special Operations Command, he’s been killing terrorists for a living for a long time,” notes one national security expert. “So, I don’t expect any decrease in drone strikes or Special Operations rates. If anything, there will be an increase.”

A greater challenge, however, could come after success on the battlefield. One advisor estimates that some 30,000 battle-hardened Islamic State fighters are expected to return to their home countries in Europe, the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia under orders to continue their struggle with “lone wolf” attacks.

Iraq

There is universal agreement among Trump’s advisors and the broader national security community that the new administration is likely to give top priority to the destruction of what remains of the Islamic State’s self-declared caliphate in Iraq. The new President’s advisors insist, however, that any such policy will not upend the organizing principle of his foreign policy, which is retrenchment — no more overseas adventures that we can not afford. That means the Trump’s military campaign against Islamic State will likely mirror the one waged by President Obama over the past year, with perhaps a few
modifications. National security experts expect the Trump administration to intensify U.S. air strikes against Islamic State’s remaining Iraqi redoubts in Mosul. The new Commander-in-Chief also might reinforce the roughly 5,000 U.S. Special Operations forces in Iraq to advise government troops for the Mosul offensive. But with Trump keenly aware of the American public’s battle fatigue after fifteen years of war, it is not clear whether Trump will leave many American troops there after Mosul falls.

The future stability of Iraq will depend largely on whether the Iran-backed Shiite-led government in Baghdad finally agrees to enfranchise the Sunnis living in the western and northwestern provinces of the country — a decision that Mattis contends the U.S. can influence with a continued troops presence and increased military aid to Baghdad. But if Baghdad continues to deny the Sunnis a share of the national pie, then it is only a matter of time before what one Middle East expert called “Islamic State 2.0” emerges from the ruins of battle and presents fresh threats to U.S. interests in the region.

Trump has returned to a theme he sounded during the campaign: the failure of previous administrations to seize Iraq’s oil as payment for liberating the country from Saddam Hussein in 2003. It is not clear whether Trump was hinting at another large-scale U.S. invasion of Iraq, which would contradict retrenchment policy, or simply swaggering as the new commander-in-chief. In any event, plundering a country’s natural resources is a war crime, under the Hague Conventions.

**Syria**

Unlike Obama, who regarded Syrian President Bashar al-Assad as a thug whose brutal suppression of a democracy-inspired insurgency disqualified him as a leader, Trump takes the opposite view. He sees the insurgents as members of the Islamic State and other violent Islamist groups. And he views the Russian-, Syrian-, and Iran-backed Hezbollah fighters who have rallied to Assad’s side as the enemies of America’s enemy, and therefore potential partners against the jihadis. Accordingly, Trump has said he is likely to abandon U.S. support for so-called “moderate” Syrian rebels fighting Assad, saying Washington has no idea whether they are quietly cooperating with the Islamists.

There is a fundamental disagreement within the administration over how to engage Russia in resolving the Syria conflict, with the President and National Security Advisor at loggerheads with the Secretary of Defense. Whether Trump and Mattis can iron out their differences and agree on a Syria policy remains unclear. Some measure of clarity could emerge after a new round of
Syria peace talks on track at the time of this writing to begin in Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan. Russia has invited Flynn to attend the negotiations, whose sponsors also include Turkey and Iran. The administration has not announced whether it will send a representative, but one veteran diplomat suggests that Trump’s approach to Syria could offer far better prospects for a peace deal than Obama’s. “You can’t, on one hand, claim to be focused on defeating the Islamic State, and on the other hand, try to overthrow the only effective opposition to the Islamic State, namely the government. It just made no sense,” said the former regional ambassador.

Gulf States

We are likely to see a more muscular U.S. policy in response to both the mounting concerns of Gulf Arab allies over Iran’s ambitions in the region and their loss of faith in the U.S. to protect them against what they consider an existential threat. “The incoming administration is very much cognizant of those concerns and will be recalibrating policies in a manner that enables the United States and its allies to deter the Iranian regime,” says one advisor on Trump’s national security team. At the very least, Trump and his national security team are expected to reassure Gulf allies of continued U.S. security guarantees and to warn that the administration will push back vigorously against any Iranian attempts to undermine governments in the region, provide support for terrorism, or build up its ballistic missile arsenal.

A former Middle East expert on the National Security Council says the new administration’s Gulf policy also could express itself in stepped-up U.S. interdiction of Iranian arms shipments to Houthi rebels in Yemen or a more aggressive response to Iranian Revolutionary Guard boats that harass U.S. Navy ships in the Persian Gulf. “We may end up sinking a ship or two just to send a message to Tehran that they should knock it off,” according to this former senior official.

Campaign advisors say Trump is not likely to stress the importance of Saudi Arabia’s social reforms or to take the kingdom to task over its treatment of women. “Trump will be even less troubled by their human rights abuses than previous presidents have been,” says a conservative foreign policy advisor. One priority will likely be restoring a comfortable working relationship with the royal family, but with one possibly contradictory condition: the new administration, these advisors say, will expect Saudi Arabia to contribute more money, manpower, and intelligence to the confrontation against Iran and the fight against jihadism. As one former ambassador put it, “Trump is going to be looking for others to do more.” Exactly how the administration resolves the tension between reassuring Gulf allies on U.S. security guarantees and demanding more security resources from them is unclear.

"We may end up sinking a ship or two just to send a message to Tehran that they should knock it off"
Iran

Trump has been highly critical of the Iran nuclear accord, certain he could have reached a better deal for the U.S. During his election campaign, Trump promised repeatedly that he would tear up the agreement and renegotiate more favorable terms. But now that he has won the White House, it is not so clear that he will scrap the agreement. Foreign policy advisors say Mattis will be a key figure to watch in the formulation of the administration’s Iran policy. Though Mattis has been an outspoken hawk on confronting Iran’s growing influence in the Middle East, he has publicly expressed his support for the nuclear accord, and there seems to be a preference to push back against Iran in other areas, such as Tehran’s influence on the Iraqi government.

“We can reasonably anticipate some effort to reduce the Iraqi government’s dependence on Tehran as a source for its security against threats posed by terrorist groups like Islamic State and Al Qaeda,” says one of those advisors. Such efforts, which this advisor says could include increased U.S. military support for Iraqi government forces, could increase tension between Washington and Tehran. Independent analysts say that one consequence could be the strengthening of hardliners in both countries. In Iran, that could spell the defeat of moderate President Hassan Rouhani in May elections. On Capitol Hill, lawmakers could respond to a spike in U.S.–Iran tensions by imposing new non-nuclear sanctions on Iran.

There is a surprising amount of agreement among advisors and experts over the fragility of the nuclear accord. A new round of non-nuclear sanctions instigated by congressional opponents of the deal could prompt Iran to pull out of the agreement during Trump’s term. “It’s really tough to stay in these agreements when they do not represent a broad consensus within the two societies,” says a former Republican national security advisor. “This agreement does not reflect that kind of consensus.” With the Trump administration expected to push back against Iranian aggression in a show of support for Middle Eastern allies, the chances of the agreement’s survival could be diminished even further. “It wouldn’t surprise me if the nuclear deal collapses,” this former official said. In either event, Trump’s deal-making skills will be put to the test if he tries to renegotiate new limits on Iran’s nuclear program.

Israel

In his effort to reset the toxic tenor of Obama’s relations with Israel, Trump has veered sharply from longstanding U.S. policy toward the Israel–Palestine dispute. Trump criticized Obama’s decision to abstain on a UN Security Council resolution that condemned Israel’s settlement construction in the
West Bank, defying the official U.S. position that the settlements constitute an obstacle to peace. Trump also has pledged repeatedly to relocate the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, a move that would upend decades of American policy calling for the city’s disputed status to be resolved through negotiations. And with his nomination of a pro-settlement ambassador who openly opposes U.S. support for a two-state solution to the Israel–Palestine conflict, Trump has signaled what some see as his intention to play an active role in Middle East peace issues as a strong ally of Israel’s right-wing government. “A likely policy is to go with whatever [Prime Minister] Benjamin Netanyahu sees as the best course for the Israelis,” says a Republican lawmaker who was considered for a senior national security post in the new administration. The same lawmaker described the moderate leaders of the Palestinian Authority as “radical Islamists … that will burn you alive in a cage or slit the throats of twenty people at a time,” echoing Flynn’s extreme views of all Muslims and underscoring why Trump is so supportive of Israel.

Veteran diplomats regard Trump’s approach as a non-starter. “That leads to a deal dictated by Netanyahu, and that’s not a deal,” says a former U.S. ambassador to Israel. “The Palestinians won’t buy it even under the most perilous of circumstances.” Some advisors are urging Trump to launch a process that aims first at building up Palestinian institutions and the West Bank economy in preparation for negotiations on statehood later on. Others believe that the presence of some 650,000 Israeli settlers in the West Bank and East Jerusalem has effectively foreclosed the possibility of a two-state solution. These advisors say that Trump would be wise to start considering a one-state solution. “You can’t draw the boundary; you can’t move the people; and you can’t trust [the Palestinians] on security,” says another former ambassador. “It’s going to have to be Israel in charge of the whole territory for security.”

"It’s going to have to be Israel in charge of the whole territory for security"

**China**

For Donald Trump, the most important priority in managing the complex U.S.–China relationship is to level the playing field in the bilateral trade relationship. In his blunt-spoken fashion, Trump has repeatedly castigated China as a “cheater” and a currency manipulator, whose unfair practices have blocked many U.S. exports, produced soaring U.S. trade imbalances and killed American jobs. He has threatened to impose an across-the-board 45 percent import tax on Chinese imports, raising the specter of a trade war. And by taking a congratulatory call from the leader of Taiwan after his election victory, Trump has raised the ante to unprecedented levels. In interviews, Trump has served notice that Washington’s one China policy —
the keystone of the relationship with Beijing for the past four decades — is now a bargaining chip, which his administration will either honor or dismiss, depending on China’s concessions on currency and trade.

Compared to the courteous diplomatic tone that Obama observed when dealing with China, Trump’s remarks augur not only a change in style, but what one foreign policy expert calls “a change in terms of the way the U.S. pursues its interests, a more pugnacious policy toward China, a willingness to push the envelope in those instances where Trump feels that core national interests are involved.”

The administration’s new approach was debuted at Tillerson’s confirmation hearing on January 12. Addressing the issue of China’s territorial claim over the South China Sea, Tillerson said that Beijing’s building of several artificial islands in the disputed waterway and its militarization of those islands was comparable to Russia’s invasion and annexation of Crimea. “We are going to have to send China a clear signal that, first, the island-building stops and, second, your access to those islands also is not going to be allowed.” Chinese Foreign Ministry officials muted their response, since Trump had not yet taken office. But when the newly installed Trump White House said the President was prepared to back up Tillerson’s threats, Beijing warned that it would defend its sovereignty and maritime rights in the South China Sea. Chinese state media put it more bluntly: The U.S. would need to “wage war” to bar China’s access to the islands, wrote the hard-line Global Times.

The aggressive tone on the South China Sea dispute signals a sharp departure from the years of cautious U.S. handling of China’s assertive territorial claims in Asia. It bears the fingerprints of Secretary of Defense James Mattis, a former Marine Corps general who favors a tougher policy to dispel any notion that the U.S. has relinquished its primacy in the Pacific, says a former national security official who is familiar with his thinking. This camp also favors countering China’s claims over the South China Sea by asserting U.S. or allied control over other maritime choke points, such as the Malacca Straits, which run among Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand.

The changes in the U.S. approach come at a time when an assertive China is more determined than ever to project its economic and military might in pursuit of its own interests. Moreover, foreign policy advisors are very conscious that, unlike eight years ago, China is on shaky footing domestically, which could draw leaders into aggression abroad, particularly over non-negotiable issues like Taiwan, which Beijing regards as a renegade province of China with no diplomatic status. “It’s an issue on which they will go to war,” warns a former ambassador who served in Beijing and speaks fluent Mandarin.
While the White House has not offered any indication of how it plans to enforce its tough talk, analysts say that U.S. military action, such as a naval blockade, would risk an armed confrontation with China. “We have such a military advantage,” says a former arms control advisor to Obama. “It would be one thing if the Chinese had the option to recapture Taiwan or to destroy the U.S. Navy in the South China Sea, but they don’t. And the Chinese recognize that.” As such, there is broad agreement among foreign policy experts that, for now, a military conflict between the U.S. and China is unlikely.

These counselors interpret Trump’s bravado over Taiwan and the South China Sea as tactical posturing to gain leverage over Beijing in the larger competition over trade. “He’s trying to convey the notion that he’s not bound by old ideas put in place by the great bureaucrats and feckless experts to chain the President in place,” says a former career diplomat who has served as ambassador in several countries. “He feels he has to be free to take foreign and security policy deep into the art of the deal. And it’s the deal that counts, the deal that mandates, and the deal that dominates a lot of his thinking.” A number of advisors and foreign policy experts, including some Democrats, cautiously applaud Trump for rattling Beijing by resurrecting the one China issue. “Making the Chinese nervous is not a bad thing, but you’ve got to play it carefully,” says a former senior aide to Obama. “What we don’t know is the extent to which Trump is going to manage the U.S.–China relationship in an artful way.”

In managing these tensions, some veteran diplomats believe that Trump already may have overplayed his hand. China responded to his Taiwan gambit by sending its carrier battle group in the Taiwan Straits, possibly kicking off a new round of Chinese military exercises around the island, which the U.S. is bound by law to defend. Increases in China’s defense spending also may be looming. “The broad issue is how far does this go,” says the Mandarin-speaking former ambassador. He also dismisses the likelihood of a clash between American and Chinese forces, but he notes that Beijing has other options short of war. “The issue is they could switch from selective cooperation, which is how I would describe their current policy, to selective non-cooperation. So, they would oppose us on things, exercise their veto in the UN rather than abstaining, work against us.”

Such a policy reversal, security advisors say, would almost certainly kill any chance of Trump’s convincing China to pressure Pyongyang to halt its nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs, his preferred solution to the North Korean threat. Yet, they add that even without a breakdown in cooperation with the U.S., China has consistently deflected U.S. demands for
a total trade embargo on its ally. With North Korea now poised to demand recognition as a nuclear power — and with experts warning that Pyongyang could soon field a nuclear-tipped missile that could reach the U.S. — Trump’s senior security advisors are now counseling a more aggressive approach to both countries.

For now, however, Trump appears likely to continue linking any return to the one China policy with concessions on trade and currency from Beijing. Asked just days before his inauguration whether he supported the one China on Taiwan, he replied, “I will make a determination over a period of time.”

**North Korea**

Pyongyang’s continued testing of nuclear weapons and long-range ballistic missiles, along with China’s reluctance to restrain its ally (or arguably its inability to do so), have reinforced the conviction among many national security experts that years of limited sanctions against North Korea have been a failure and that it is time to rethink the U.S. approach to this looming threat. “North Korea is probably the signature U.S. foreign policy failure of the entire post-World War II period,” says one former ambassador with long experience in China. “The current cause is not going to lead anywhere except to Pyongyang holding Los Angeles hostage. Somebody’s got to come up with a new framework.”

So far, the Trump administration has said that it intends to develop what it calls a “state of the art” missile defense system to counter North Korean missile attacks. It is unclear how the new system would differ from the THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defense) missile batteries that the U.S. plans to deploy in South Korea, or the Aegis missile defense system aboard U.S. warships positioned off the Korean peninsula. And there is some doubt as to whether, short of a direct provocation from Pyongyang, there is an appetite in the administration to prioritize dealing with this challenge. “I don’t see anybody on the landscape of American foreign policy willing to undertake that,” says one advisor familiar with the thinking of Mattis. “This administration isn’t interventionist enough to take out the North Korean nuclear weapons program preemptively. They are likely to view the North Koreans as a status quo power rather than one seeking to change the status quo, and therefore believe they can ignore it.” This sentiment was echoed by a close associate of Flynn’s: “I don’t think that that’s going to be high on the priorities list, short of the North Koreans doing something unexpected, a black swan type of event. Firing missiles at Japan or into South Korea.”
Those advocating for greater attention note that by 2020 North Korea could have as many as 50 nuclear weapons and will be capable of fielding a long-range missile that could deliver a nuclear warhead to the western continental U.S. There is also a significant proliferation risk as South Korea and Japan consider what they call an “independent nuclear policy,” which has been encouraged by President Trump’s statements undermining the U.S. nuclear umbrella. If the Trump administration were to take action, it would likely focus on coercing China to take action, something that outside experts suggest would likely backfire.

Southeast Asia

We can expect the U.S. will have reduced influence on Southeast Asian nations, thanks largely to Trump’s withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, or TPP, the free trade agreement among twelve Pacific Rim nations that formed a critical component of Obama’s “pivot” to the region. The accord, which excludes China, promised to reduce Southeast Asia’s dependence on Chinese trade and to draw the region closer to the U.S. Now, foreign policy and trade experts say, the Southeast Asian nations are likely to drift closer to China as Beijing moves to restore its historical primacy in the region. “To let [TPP] die is a strategic mistake for us in Asia,” says a former U.S. trade representative. “It creates a web of dependences among countries who themselves want to balance the U.S. and China.” With Trump’s withdrawal from the accord, “all we’re doing is strengthening China,” this official says. White House officials underplayed the significance of the deal, stating, “All the countries in the region that are scared to death of Chinese hegemony will be our allies.”

There is now concern among some Trump’s advisors that his rejection of TPP leaves him with an uncertain military approach to the challenges China poses to the region. He has raised serious questions about U.S. security guarantees, complaining that longstanding allies like Japan and South Korea are not paying enough for the military protection the U.S. provides. He has even suggested that Tokyo and Seoul should develop their own nuclear weapons. “The problem we have is we’ve gone decades in a world where the U.S. was rich enough to subsidize our alliances,” says a senior Trump national security advisor. “We just don’t have the financial resources to do that anymore. Unless there’s a rebalancing of the burden and a clearer set of objectives for those alliances, they will fail.”

Such remarks are prompting Southeast Asian countries to reassess their relations with the U.S. “They’re going to be testing to see if we have staying power, if we’re going to remain a credible ally and a credible trading partner,”
“A lot of these countries are going to become very nervous and feel they're going to have to make accommodations with the Chinese.”

Foreign policy advisors believe a crack has already opened in the Philippines, a longtime U.S. ally, where President Rodrigo Duterte has called for the removal of American forces from his country after signing agreements with China for billions of dollars in economic assistance. Some veteran diplomats say that Duterte’s defection underscores one of the hazards of Trump’s worldview. “If you decide that you want to divide the world into spheres of influence, some people are going to decide they don’t want to be on your side of the line,” says a former ambassador.

Within Trump’s national security brain trust, there are dissenting views. Secretary of Defense James Mattis, for one, is known to disagree with Trump’s views on the South China Sea and to value highly the U.S. alliances with Japan and South Korea, but it is unclear whether his views will prevail as the new administration crafts its policy toward Southeast Asia. “We don’t know whether or not they’re going to have any interest in the rebalance, whether or not the next president is going to say that rebalance is dead or alive,” says a former senior official on Obama’s National Security Council.

Africa

Given the demands on the new administration in the Middle East, Europe and Asia, it is expected that Africa will continue to get limited attention. The top priority for the region will be combatting terrorism and the rise of Islamic State-affiliated or independent extremist groups on the continent. AFRICOM, which is relatively unappreciated in terms of the size and scope of the U.S. commitment, is expected to continue. The main deviation could be a more robust economic agenda, given Tillerson’s experience in the region developing oil and gas assets.

Latin America

Much like Africa, it is widely believed among the foreign policy community that Latin America will get short shrift from the U.S. in the next administration. That said, a top economic advisor to the President suggested that the opposite could be true. “Mr. Trump’s vision for economic growth and prosperity is all about the Americas. He’s talking about a grand vision with
Mexico, and that will certainly extend to Central and South America. One of the best trade deals we’ve made was CAFTA.”

Latin America experts outside the administration point to a range of very serious threats to the U.S. and the region that are worthy of attention, both exogenous — a collapse in Venezuela — and endogenous - most notably the feckless handling of the U.S.-Mexico relationship that has already manufactured a rift with this critical economic and security partner. Observers note that by remaining in campaign mode and playing to his U.S. audience, Trump could so destabilize Mexico as to make his immigration crisis a self-fulfilling prophecy. And even if he fails to follow through on this Mexican-funded wall project, a former NSC official notes that “the biggest issue is the uncertainty” which could have a chilling effect on inward FDI. While there’s limited commercial rationale for the relationship, Mexico and China have already indicated their intent to deepen their ties in direct response to the new administration’s pugilistic posture toward both.

Immigration, or more accurately, refugees from violence, but also economic collapse and extreme weather, could in fact present very serious issues for the U.S. in terms of both our foreign policy and domestic politics. But given the range of challenges confronting the U.S. around the world, the hostility of the Trump administration to climate science, and its embrace of the border wall as the solution, it is unlikely that the U.S. government will be more active in heading off this potential humanitarian crisis before it arrives on our southern border.

**Trade**

President Trump’s first move on trade was the withdrawal of the U.S. from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), which foreign policy counselors believe has given Beijing a leg up in the region, demonstrating the administration’s failure to understand 1) its critical role in the pivot to Asia and countering Chinese economic and military influence in the region; 2) its importance to U.S. credibility in negotiating international agreements; and 3) the fundamental value of trade agreements to our economy and our country. These advisors say his rejection of the free trade agreement has cleared the way for Beijing to corral the same Asian nations into China’s own version of the accord, one that would exclude the U.S. and allow China to set the rules on issues such as labor and environmental protections. Trump claims he will strike far more favorable terms in bilateral agreements with the countries involved.
While many in Congress also oppose the TPP, trade officials say that Trump’s anti-trade posture — particularly around NAFTA, given the integration of North American supply chains — risks alienating lawmakers and corporate leaders. “Congress won’t want to see a breach of relations on the economic side,” says a former U.S. Trade Representative. “That’s highly problematic. Our companies will go totally crazy.” Some Trump supporters suggest that this is just an opening volley and that the President will advance a similar agreements at a later date, but experts note that the damage done to U.S. credibility as a negotiating partner will not be easily undone. The next battle is expected over the NAFTA “reboot” and potentially a bilateral U.S.–UK deal in place of the expansive Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, part of a broader embrace of bilateralism over multilateralism.

Climate Change

Without question, the U.S. is poised to take a major step back from its global leadership role on climate change, but the specific contours of its position remain unclear as different actors within the administration have radically different views on this critical issue. Ultimately, while vilified by the environmental community, Tillerson at State may end up being a moderating force within the government.

As an associate of his at ExxonMobil pointed out, when Tillerson became CEO, “he instituted a carbon price in evaluating any project the company undertook. He has advocated for a carbon tax, which he felt was a more direct means of counteracting climate change.” He has also openly opposed walking away from the Paris Accord. How that squares with an administration committed to dismantling the primary mechanisms of compliance — CAFE standards, methane regulations, and the Clean Power Plan — is unclear.

The one position shared by all Trump supporters and advisors interviewed was that the Paris Accord was a bad deal, which “allows India and China to go for ten years without dealing with any of the problem and meanwhile forces us to crack down on the most environmentally efficient coal industry in the world.” While some suggested that the non-binding nature of the agreement would allow the U.S. to thread the needle, one could also expect to see a focus on innovation and renewed support for nuclear power. Whatever the case, U.S. global leadership will be passed to countries like China, which recognizes the commercial potential of its cleantech industries.
Long-Term Shifts

The 2016 election, and the rise of populism, have crystalized new divisions in the U.S. based on a strong anti-elite sentiment and rejection of globalization. A former Defense Department official captured the mood in saying, “Our country is falling apart at the seams because of global and technology driven economic changes. We have been enriching our economy and impoverishing our people, and not being honest with ourselves about it.”

That awakening has come, and there is a general acknowledgment that addressing economic displacement, which will only increase with new technologies like artificial intelligence (AI) and robotics, is critical for continued U.S. leadership in the world. Summed up by a former senior U.S. government official, now heading up one of Washington’s leading think tanks, “We have lost a consensus in America for how America should be a global leader. That grows out of the decay of our domestic politics, and the question is, ‘How long does that continue?’ I think, sadly, it will continue for quite a while.” The notion that we cannot afford global leadership while our infrastructure is crumbling, our education system is underperforming, and our people feel a sense of hopelessness about the future has been effectively used by Trump’s candidacy and does not look likely to improve in his presidency.

This can be tied to the collapse of authority and the rise of populist, anti-globalist voices around the world. As one former senior Defense Department official and current campaign advisor noted with dismay, “We want to think the challenges we face can be defeated by more targeted military intelligence and other operations. That may not be the totality of the threat at all. It may be less about targeted bombs, even though they’re going to cause a loss of life, but it may be more about upsetting an entire world order that I’ve spent my whole lifetime trying to perpetuate.” Or, as a former ambassador noted, we have entered a “new world disorder — economically with the collapse of trade and investment liberalization, politically with the rise of authoritarianism and the diminished appeal of democracy, and militarily with the emergence of transnational military movements.”

This is all exacerbated by rapid technological change and the disintermediation of institutions. There has been a great deal of attention paid to the use of social media platforms to give voice to the disenfranchised, as well as to provide a platform for extremism. Another pressing challenge that has not received much attention, and for which no immediate solutions have been offered, is how ill-equipped our system of governance is to function in this new world. A former National Security Council official and campaign advisor noted, “This is a huge challenge for doing anything.

"We have lost a consensus in America for how America should be a global leader"
There’s just no time for reflection and thought. We’re not set up as a government to operate in real time. Even the classification system requires you to be physically present in the office — that’s the lag.”

That extends to our international institutions, which were already under pressure to adapt to new challenges. A former Obama administration national security official noted, “How we develop new tools inside old shops with longstanding relationships — that will be the challenge of our time. And how to make these organizations more inclusive while upholding our values will be a fundamental challenge as well,” and one made all the more complicated as the U.S. President actively undermines those institutions.

Russian hacking in the U.S. election has also brought focus on the growing risk posed by cyberattacks on our data, but also on our physical infrastructure — something that was cited by advisors and experts as an area in which the U.S. government is still in the early stages of defining effective policy. This also points to a broader trend away from the traditional state-to-state bilateral relationships that have dominated traditional foreign policy (although they will remain important), to a “functionalization” of policy around diffuse, shared global challenges. Climate change would also fall into this category and was cited again and again as a destabilizing force in the world moving forward, however one that is unlikely to be prioritized by this administration.

Finally, while discomfort with immigration and xenophobia was prominent in this election, the dominant view is that this short-term stress could be converted into a long-term advantage for the U.S. if we can get sensible policy in place — something that looks unlikely under the Trump administration. Russia is in a “demographic death spiral.” China is “lucky if they’re able to deal with these challenges from a middle-income status.” And our allies in Japan and Europe are also struggling with aging, shrinking populations, without our traditional embrace of immigration and assimilation into a national identity based on shared values. Unfortunately, while Trump advisors acknowledge that our aging population is a long-term challenge, they by and large fail to connect immigration to the vitality of the U.S. economy.
Conclusion

If the first week of the Trump administration is any indication, rather than take on these complex challenges to position the U.S. for sustained growth, strength and leadership, the President and his closest advisors seem intent upon delivering on his most extreme campaign promises with no regard for process or the broader effect of their statements and policies – undermining our interests and our values.
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