
The Case for Trump's Foreign Policy

The Right People, the Right Positions

Matthew Kroenig

Media coverage of U.S. President Donald Trump's foreign policy has been overwhelmingly negative. Analysts have seized on early policy missteps, a supposed slowness in staffing the national security bureaucracy, and controversial statements and actions as evidence that Trump's foreign policy is already failing.

But the critics have gotten a lot wrong and failed to give credit where credit is due. The Trump administration has left behind the rhetoric of the campaign trail and has begun to adopt foreign policies that are, for the most part, well suited to the challenges ahead. Trump inherited a crumbling international order from President Barack Obama, but he has assembled a highly capable national security team to help him update and revitalize it. Many of the controversial foreign policy statements that Trump has made as president have, in fact, been consistent with established U.S. policy. Where he has broken with tradition, it has often been to embrace much-needed change.

MATTHEW KROENIG is Associate Professor of Government and Foreign Service at Georgetown University and a Senior Fellow at the Brent Scowcroft Center on International Security at the Atlantic Council. Follow him on Twitter @kroenig.

It is too early to pass definitive judgment on the Trump administration. But its rapid improvement, combined with Trump's own willingness to take bold action, suggests that former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger may have been right when he told CBS News last December that Trump's presidency could present "an extraordinary opportunity" for U.S. foreign policy.

TRUMP'S INHERITANCE

To gauge the success of a president's foreign policy, it helps to examine the record of his immediate predecessor. Here, the Trump administration has a low bar to clear. In Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, Obama left behind a far more dangerous world than the one he inherited in 2009.

For the first time since World War II, Russia is redrawing the map of Europe at gunpoint. Meeting only a weak response from the West, Russian President Vladimir Putin continues to threaten and undermine the United States and its NATO allies in a bid to break the alliance.

In Asia, the picture is little better. China has seized contested territory from U.S. allies and is undertaking a massive military buildup that the country's leaders hope will eventually render the United States unable to keep its security commitments in the Asia-Pacific. The Obama administration's policy of "strategic patience" with North Korea was a euphemism for standing idly by as threats gathered. According to expert estimates, Pyongyang now has up to 21 warheads and is on track to have nuclear missiles that could hit the continental United States.



At your service: H. R. McMaster with Trump at Mar-a-Lago, Florida, February 2017

The worst of the Obama administration's failures took place in the Middle East. The United States oversaw the wholesale disintegration of the region and the rise of the Islamic State (also known as ISIS). Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen have failed or are failing as states, turning them into incubators of terrorism. ISIS is metastasizing and inspiring attacks around the world, including in the United States. Unwilling to upset nuclear negotiations with Iran, Obama failed to counter Tehran's advancing missile program and its support for terrorist groups. Today, Iran is testing long-range ballistic missiles and projecting its influence throughout the Middle East, worsening the security of the United States and its partners. Moreover, although the nuclear deal delayed the Iranian nuclear program, it created a serious problem for future U.S. presidents, who will have to figure

out what to do when the limits on Iran's nuclear program begin to expire in less than a decade.

In every region of the world important to the United States, the last eight years have left emboldened enemies, nervous allies, and increasing disorder. Obama may have inherited two difficult counterinsurgency campaigns, but he bequeathed to his successor an entire world in disarray. Indeed, the current international environment may be the worst that any incoming president has faced since the height of the Cold War. The good news is that this low starting point may allow Trump to dramatically improve the United States' position.

THE A-TEAM

A president cannot foresee all the foreign policy crises he will face, but he can choose the people he will have

at his side when those crises erupt. As Trump promised during the campaign, he has assembled a team of “the best and brightest” the country has to offer. Secretary of Defense James Mattis and National Security Adviser H. R. McMaster rank among the most influential military officers of their generation. Both are not only extraordinary leaders but also intellectuals capable of farsighted strategic thinking. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson served as the CEO of ExxonMobil for over a decade, running a corporation with revenue larger than the GDPs of many small nations and overseeing operations in more than 40 countries. Rounding out the national security cabinet, Vice President Mike Pence, UN Ambassador Nikki Haley, Director of National Intelligence Dan Coates, and CIA Director Mike Pompeo are all experienced and accomplished politicians. Some have raised concerns about the placement of Steve Bannon, the White House chief strategist, on the National Security Council’s Principals Committee. But Obama also regularly invited political advisers to NSC meetings, and as in the past, the discussions will likely center not on politics but on the views of national security officials.

Critics have also slammed Trump for filling subcabinet positions too slowly, but this charge is ill informed; George W. Bush’s undersecretary of defense for policy, for example, did not take office until six months after Bush’s inauguration. Moreover, those who have been named, such as Brian Hook, appointed as the State Department’s director of policy planning, and Jon Huntsman, a former governor of Utah and Trump’s nominee for ambassador to Russia, are experienced and highly respected public servants.

BETTER THAN IT LOOKS

Like any new administration, the Trump team has made mistakes. It designed and rolled out the initial travel ban poorly, an unforced error given the popular support for stronger border security and immigration reform. More broadly, the team has struggled to stay on message. But taking a step back reveals that Trump has gotten much of the big picture right. The world is changing rapidly, and the United States must adapt if it is to succeed. Trump’s comfort with disruptive change may make him particularly well placed to oversee a creative reinvigoration of U.S. foreign policy.

Some have charged that Trump’s “America first” approach signals the end of international U.S. leadership. It doesn’t. If the United States is not strong at home, it cannot be strong abroad. Trump’s calls for tax cuts, deregulation, and major infrastructure investments have already boosted domestic economic confidence. From last year’s election to the beginning of March, U.S. stocks added nearly \$3 trillion to their value. Under Trump, the United States may finally break out of its recent cycle of low productivity, low inflation, and low growth.

To maintain its international position, the United States will need a strong military. Trump has promised “one of the greatest military buildups in history.” His first budget proposal includes a \$54 billion down payment on this promise, and, working with Republican majorities in Congress, the administration will likely improve on this opening bid. The Department of Defense will finally get the funds Obama denied it.

Trump recognized that the U.S. military must modernize to face a new nuclear age when he promised in an

interview with Reuters in February that the United States would be at the “top of the pack” in nuclear capabilities. Critics have called this goal reckless, but the United States must have a robust nuclear force to protect its allies in Europe and Asia. Moreover, past U.S. presidents have expressed similar ambitions. John F. Kennedy, for example, avowed in 1963 that it was “essential that the United States in this area of national strength and national vigor should be second to none.”

Since Trump's inauguration, his administration has also shown strong support for U.S. allies. Mattis made Seoul and Tokyo the first overseas stops by a Trump cabinet official, and Trump further solidified his commitment to Asia by hosting Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe for an intimate weekend gathering at his Mar-a-Lago estate, in Florida. As president-elect, Trump called NATO “obsolete,” but since taking office, he has repeatedly voiced his support for the alliance, a message that Pence and Mattis relayed in person at the Munich Security Conference in February. Some have criticized Trump for suggesting that NATO members should increase their defense spending, but U.S. administrations from Dwight Eisenhower's to Obama's have made this same request. The only difference is that Trump's approach is working. As Germany's defense minister, Ursula von der Leyen, said at the Munich Security Conference, “Our traditional reflex of relying above all on our American friends' vigor and ducking away when things really get tight . . . will no longer be enough. . . . We must also carry our share of the burden.” Others disparage Trump for saying that NATO should be updated “to include terror,” as he told *The New York*

Times in March of last year. But alliance officials in Brussels are the first to agree that NATO must continue to adapt to meet twenty-first-century threats.

It is true that Trump has shown an unusually intense interest in greater cooperation with Russia, but the general inclination is not unreasonable. Both Bush and Obama sought closer relations with Putin, and there is no doubt that more cooperation could further U.S. interests. Yet the blame for the recent downturn in relations falls squarely on Putin's shoulders. And Trump has demonstrated that he will be no pushover, promising to support NATO and strengthen the United States' nuclear deterrent. He has also appointed Putin critics to every major national security post, including the Brookings scholar Fiona Hill as the senior director for Europe and Russia at the NSC.


In the Middle East, in a welcome reversal from the Obama years, U.S. partners such as Israel and the Gulf states are hopeful, while the United States' long-standing enemy Iran is wary. Critics scoff at Trump's promise to “renegotiate” the Iran nuclear deal, but the deal will have to be renegotiated at some point to address its sunset clauses, because after they expire, Iran will have a rapid path to a nuclear weapon. To pressure Iran into returning to the table, Trump has signaled that he will enforce the strict terms of the nuclear accord while turning up the heat on Iran in all the ways not covered by the deal. These should include countering Iran's malign influence in the region by, for example, intercepting more of Iran's arms shipments to the Houthi rebels in Yemen and imposing new sanctions in response to its ballistic missile tests, support for

terrorist groups, and human rights violations. Finally, Trump has already begun to follow through on his promise to wage a more aggressive campaign against ISIS, following years of bipartisan calls to increase the tempo of operations against the group.

In Asia, the Trump administration has launched a review of U.S. policy toward North Korea that will leave no options off the table. Trump has also accepted the long-standing and successful “one China” policy, under which Washington officially recognizes only the government in Beijing but has an unofficial relationship with Taiwan. The administration also seems committed to strengthening the alliances necessary to counter Chinese aggression and has vowed to stand up to China’s mercantilist policies.

The United States benefits from free trade, as Trump has repeatedly acknowledged. In February, for example, he told Congress, “I believe strongly in free trade, but it also has to be fair trade.” Indeed, Washington cannot stand by as China and other trading partners game the system. What’s more, long-standing trade pacts, such as the North American Free Trade Agreement, lack provisions, such as standards for Internet commerce, contained in modern accords. Updating them would improve protections for millions of American workers. U.S. business leaders from sectors as diverse as traditional manufacturing and high-end services, such as finance and shipping, complained that in negotiating the Trans-Pacific Partnership, Obama sold out U.S. business interests to increase U.S. political influence in the Asia-Pacific. Although the administration’s withdrawal from the agreement has

created an opening for China, Trump’s promise to renegotiate old trade deals and strike new ones could pave the way to a global trade regime that advances U.S. political and economic interests simultaneously.

On almost every front, Trump has begun to correct the failures of the past eight years and position the United States well for the challenges to come. With the current team and policies in place, and with greater adherence to a core strategy going forward, Trump may well, as Kissinger predicted was possible, go “down in history as a very considerable president.”

The contents of Foreign Affairs are protected by copyright. © 2004 Council on Foreign Relations, Inc., all rights reserved. To request permission to reproduce additional copies of the article(s) you will retrieve, please contact the Permissions and Licensing office of Foreign Affairs.