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Event Analysis

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Trump: Upending 70 years of U.S. Foreign Policy and What it Means for the Western Balkans

Tanya L. Domi*

Introduction

The consequences of the election of Donald J. Trump have revealed dramatic changes in American foreign policy: an up-ended world order, the public embrace of despots, the virtual elimination of diplomacy, the announcement of eye-popping arms deals, a degradation of human rights and democracy, and the withdrawal of American global leadership from an international agreement to combat climate change.

On the campaign trail, Trump preached “*Make America Great Again*” by promising to change business as usual, in Washington D.C. and well beyond America’s shores.

Trump wasted no time in making good on his promise, notwithstanding the optics of his inaugural trip abroad, stopping first in Saudi Arabia to sign a multi-billion dollar arms deal and promising “not to lecture – we are not here to tell other people how to live, what to do...” – a euphemism for dropping human rights from the US-Saudi bilateral relationship.¹

But the fallout from his Brussels meetings with NATO and the G7 sent tidal waves of anxiety across Europe – his failure to specifically reaffirm Article 5 of the NATO Charter, and therefore confirm commitment to the common defense of NATO partners, is arguably the most dramatic departure in U.S. security policy since the alliance’s foundation in 1949. While he did affirm U.S. commitment to Article 5 in a subsequent press conference on the occasion of a meeting with the President of Romania, his inconsistent behavior understandably makes it difficult for anyone to know with certainty whether this is, in fact, settled and unquestionable American policy.

By the fifth month of this new administration, we can conclude with some confidence that Trump possesses a non-ideological world view — an anomaly for a U.S. president — while asserting a radical departure from the norms of conventional international relations as practiced by the United States during the past 70 years; a departure that could lead to an international geopolitical realignment.

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¹ President, United States of America, address to the Arab Islamic American Summit, Riyadh, in Trump, Donald J. 2017. *We Are not Here to Lecture*. *Vital Speeches*, 21. May 2017 (accessed: 01. July 2017).

Indeed, the post-World War II “long peace” era may be ending as a consequence of these dramatically shifting geopolitical alliances.

Foreign policy in the Trump administration - early indicators

During the first week of assuming power, the White House stripped the State Department of more than 150 years of diplomatic experience by summarily sacking nearly all the senior executive leadership. If anything, a takeaway conclusion from these first moves could reasonably hold that the more expertise and experience a diplomat had on January 20th, the more likely they were to face termination. The Trump regime appears to be suspicious of expertise and knowledge, relying instead on a small and family-focused team of inexperienced advisors, which could be a harbinger for the way foreign policy and national security policy will be shaped and carried out over the next four years.

Trump’s Department of State budget calls for a cut of 30 percent in operating costs, the elimination of 2,300 personnel,² and the closure of between 30 and 40 USAID Missions – in essence dispensing with soft power tools such as foreign assistance and the promotion of democracy around the world. These are dramatic cuts to the diplomatic mission of the U.S. As former Vice-President Biden has said: “Show me your budget and I’ll show you what you value.”³ Apparently diplomacy is less valued, while military armaments have priority in the Trump administration.

It remains to be seen whether Congress agrees with this controversial budget proposal. Many Capitol Hill watchers, including members of the Senate Republican caucus, have said the Trump budget is dead on arrival.

Trump’s worldview and isolationism in foreign policy

Trump is neither realist, neoconservative nor liberal, but rather isolationist and transactionalist, and, as he steers the administration’s embrace of his nationalist campaign mantra “*Make America Great Again!*”, many critics fear that putting a narrow and short-term reading of America’s interests at home ahead of strategic and long-standing allies and partners abroad could be seen as both a threat and a retreat from the world.

Trump promised his supporters that he would disentangle the U.S. from further engagement in Middle Eastern wars, but this commitment has not been kept, as the Pentagon has *increased* combat operations and U.S. troop deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan, not to mention the announced multi-billion dollar arms deal with the Saudis.⁴

² Wadhams, Nick, 2017. Tillerson Seeking 9% Cut to U.S. State Department Workforce. *Sources Say*. *Bloomberg*, 27. April 2017 (accessed: 03. July 2017).

³ Biden’s Remarks on McCains’ Policies. *The New York Times*, 15. September 2008.

⁴ According to Brookings Institute analyst Bruce Riedel, there is no Saudi arms deal, see Riedel, Bruce. 2017. The \$110 Billion Arms Deal to Saudi Arabia is Fake News. *Brookings*, 5. June 2017 (accessed: 03. July 2017).

However, Trump remains not only skeptical of but hostile to international institutions, for example, referring to NATO as “obsolete” during the campaign. While attending the recent G7, he threatened to withdraw the U.S. from the Paris Climate Change accords and made good on that promise less than a week later.

Trump’s foreign policy is unquestionably transactional, grounded more in his real estate experience of buying and selling; i.e., his insistence that NATO member states pay up to two percent of their respective GDP (always an aspirational goal), repeated in an embarrassing lecture issued to NATO allies in the shadow of a 9/11 memorial at NATO headquarters in Brussels, pronouncing that member states’ failure to pay placed an unfair burden upon the American taxpayer.

Similarly, Trump has told the South Korean government that it should pay for the U.S. deployment of a \$1 billion defense missile system, and that failure to do so could damage trade relations between the two countries. In both instances, Trump has failed to recognize how these forward deployed defense organizations and systems also protect and defend America’s security. To date, a Republican-controlled Congress has continued to support these projects, disregarding his rhetoric but sending troubling and conflicting messages to the world.

This kind of transactional foreign policy is ad hoc, with undefined rules for specific situations, and it lacks a strategic approach to global geopolitics, leaving allies and partners confused and anxious. Roger Cohen, a columnist for *The New York Times*, has called the Trump foreign policy a “valueless” policy, which will have devastating consequences for the world. In the modern era, the U.S. has been viewed as the (admittedly imperfect) bulwark for freedom and the exercise of universal human rights around the world. These values, manifested as integrated policies, have arguably been one of the strongest aspects of American foreign policy when implemented. Indeed, America’s embrace of human rights is arguably the most deeply admired of U.S. policies by its supporters, and the most feared by those who rule with an authoritarian bent.

Yet Secretary of State Tillerson – a businessman with no diplomatic experience – informed State Department employees that “human rights was a U.S. value,” but then asserted that policy changes and a rebalancing of U.S. foreign policy priorities is now required.⁵ A withdrawal from America’s longstanding affirmation of human rights and respect for the rule of law is a significant break from U.S. foreign policy. Removing human rights as a central core value in the implementation of U.S. foreign policy represents the gutting of soft power across the spectrum of U.S. foreign policy initiatives. This could ultimately default to hard power and military action if left unchecked, a legitimate fear expressed by national security experts, including James Mattis, the Secretary of Defense, who has publicly said that stopping short of fully

⁵ Secretary Rex. W. Tillerson’s remarks to U.S. Department of State Employees, Washington, D.C., 3. May.

funding the State Department means he will be forced to buy more ammunition.

Trump's affinity for authoritarian leaders

It is also more than apparent that Trump has a clear and curious affinity for authoritarian leaders. This was already evident during the campaign, as he repeatedly professed his deep admiration for Vladimir Putin. Since taking office, Trump has hosted a stream of some of the world's worst despots; Abd El-Fattah el-Sisi from Egypt; Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey; and an invitation has been extended to Rodrigo Duterte of The Philippines. He also visibly reveled in the royal treatment he received from his Saudi monarch hosts. All of these actions stand in stark relief when contrasted with his cold and even surly treatment of the leaders of democratic states.

In addition, there may be more to Trump's admiration for Putin than his "strong leadership" style. Trump's presidential campaign is currently under investigation from several different fronts for questionable relationships and unreported contacts with Russian officials that are alleged to have occurred during the campaign and transition period in the run-up to the inauguration. A special prosecutor was appointed by the Justice Department, two federal grand juries have been convened, and at least three Congressional committees have opened up investigations.

From Friends to Frenemies? The US and the European Union

The European Union (EU) has been in a state of perpetual crisis since the 2008 global recession. There has been a series of dizzily challenging crises during the past nine years: the Euro monetary crisis in the wake of the 2008 global recession; Greece nearly going into default; the demonstration of significant weaknesses in the economies of Portugal, Italy and Spain; the Russian invasion of Ukraine and its annexation of Crimea; the Syrian refugee crisis that flooded into the European continent; and last but not least, the Brexit vote.

Trump's open support for the vote's outcome, and for the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the EU, was an early psychological blow to European allies, sending the message that Trump was not committed to a conventional U.S. partnership with Europe and the Euro-Atlantic European institutions.

The new president's open hostility towards Angela Merkel, arguably the most powerful political leader in Europe, is troubling, and could signal a harbinger of things to come, especially in the aftermath of the U.S. withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement. However, the recent election of President Emmanuel Macron of France reinforces the power of the EU leadership and provides Merkel with an important partner. Once again, France and Germany are likely to rejoin as close partners in this moment to bolster the EU project in the face of growing nationalism in the United Kingdom and the United States.

The Western Balkans - is there a Balkan policy?

Today the Western Balkans are arguably at their most discordant and fragile since the early 1990s, during the run-up to the wars that ended Tito's Yugoslavia. Thus, the combination of the Brexit vote followed by Trump's election creates a foreboding sense of doom about the future of the region, generally acknowledged by many Balkan specialists. While the UK has promised to host the 2017 Western Balkans Summit in London later this year, and Prime Minister Theresa May has also committed "to do more to counter destabilising Russian disinformation campaigns and raise the visibility of the Western commitment to this region,"⁶ there has been no formal statement from the U.S. State Department about the Balkans, although it has been reported in the media that Vice-President Mike Pence has invited Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić to the White House later this summer.⁷

When everything is added up together, the Trump repositioning of U.S. foreign policy could be more than an idle threat to the Western Balkans, given its tenuous state of political and economic affairs. After the events of 9/11, the U.S. began to withdraw from playing a leadership role in the region, although the Bush Administration did strongly support Kosovo's independence. The Obama Administration further ceded leadership in the Balkans to the EU, which views the challenges in the region as problems that can be overcome through the enlargement process.

However, support for further enlargement has cooled in Brussels, though High Representative/Vice President Federica Mogherini recently promised to partner closely with the Balkan states while urging them to double down on implementing necessary reforms. Mogherini has promised to return to the region this summer.

More Democracy, Rule of Law and Political Accountability

More democracy, more rule of law and more transparency and political accountability are the medicines that will cure what ails these states, but given the policy shift in the Trump administration, it is doubtful such support will be forthcoming from the U.S.

From Zagreb to Tirana, the region is plagued by authoritarian-style leaders, yielding to illiberal governance characterized by kleptocratic politicians who steal at will from the public trough. Without exception, the pervasive lack of transparency and accountability enables these "stabilitocracies"⁸ staying power while the West looks away. The West's failure to genuinely hold these states to EU accession criteria, for example with respect to human rights and the rule of law, is acutely apparent to the chagrin of human rights defenders and pro-democratic activists throughout the region.

⁶ Dearden, Lizzie. 2017. EU Leaders Voice Fears Over 'Fragile Balkans Situation' as Theresa May Vows to Counter Russia. *Independent*, 10. March 2017 (accessed: 03. July 2017).

⁷ N.N. Yucic Denies That Visiting US Official "Represents Nobody". *B92*, 24. May 2017 (accessed: 03. July 2017).

⁸ Bieber, Florian. 2017. What is a Stabilitocracy? *Balkans in Europe Policy blog*, 5. May 2017 (accessed: 03. July 2017).

This pattern of empty rhetoric by Western diplomats is particularly corrosive to creating healthy democracies in a region which continues to face challenges in its recovery from the wars of the 1990s. Prosecutions for war crimes committed during the 1990s are ongoing in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, and Serbia, yet there is still a lack of political will to meaningfully address the past; undermining the rule of law and the possibility of establishing authentic political stability and reconciliation. As the Hague war crimes tribunal winds up its mandate, there is a sense among many survivors and some advocates that, despite important prosecutions yielding groundbreaking international jurisprudence, many feel little justice has been achieved under these political circumstances.

The under-performing economic situation throughout the region animates social unrest and perpetuates a continuous brain drain of youth from the region. Depopulation plagues the region, a consequence not only of the war but of the poor economic climate. As just one example, today more than 500,000 people from the former Yugoslavia live in Vienna, of which about 150,000 are second generation.⁹ Brain drain and low birthrates both contribute to and reflect the lack of confidence in the future in the region.

A geopolitical regional battle between the West and Russia?

There is growing concern that Russia is vying for geopolitical influence in the region, directly competing with the EU and the U.S. and filling vacuums caused by the lack of sustained engagement by the largest Western powers. Politically, Bosnia and Herzegovina remains in a frozen internal conflict, with the Serb entity enjoying support from Moscow for its threats to secede. Macedonia has languished in a state of political corruption and acts of violence and is seemingly teetering on the edge, while Moscow is reported to have been working assiduously to bring it into the Kremlin's geopolitical sphere of influence.¹⁰

Indeed, Russia has increased its soft power presence in Serbia by buying domestic media outlets and exporting its propaganda via the *Russia Today* television station and *Sputnik News*. But it is also brandishing its hard power influence by providing the Serbian government with several refitted MiG fighter jets and retrofitted T-72 tanks, announced during the run-up to Serbia's recent presidential elections. Belgrade and Moscow have engaged in joint military exercises during the past several years, and Serbia is a non-member observer to the Collective Security Treaty Organization, an intergovernmental military alliance led by the Russian Federation that was formed in 1992.

Russia's alleged coup attempt during Montenegro's elections last October, presumably in retaliation for its efforts to join NATO, is deeply disconcerting. While details remain fuzzy, about a dozen Serb nationals were detained and

⁹ Kopanja, Jelena. 2012. *The Yugosphere: Not Just Balkan Nostalgia*. *Vienna Review*, 11. October 2012 (accessed: 03. July 2017).

¹⁰ Harding, Luke / Belford, Aubrey and Saska Cvetkovska. 2017. *Russia Actively Stoking Discord in Macedonia since 2008*. *Intel Files Say*. *The Guardian*, 4. June 2017 (accessed: 03. July 2017).

sent back to Belgrade, and two Russian nationals are being sought under a warrant issued by INTERPOL. Recent reporting by the OCCRP indicates that Russia, in partnership with Serbia, has been actively working to undermine democratic development in the region, to “create a strip of militarily neutral countries” in the Balkans.¹¹

Finally, while Kosovo and Albania remain the two most pro-U.S. countries in the Western Balkans, it is unclear whether Trump’s anti-Muslim world view could get in the way of long-standing good relations between these countries.

Traditionally, the U.S., in partnership with the EU, would be poised to prevent and respond to political and ethnic conflict in the Balkans and put the brakes on the disintegration of the region. But there continues to be cause for concern about the region’s future. When Michael McFaul, former U.S. Ambassador to Russia, was asked in a recent television interview if he was concerned about Russia’s aspirations in the Baltics, he responded negatively. He then said that if he was concerned about any region, it would be the Balkans, where most Americans do not know the names of the countries, or with whom they are aligned.¹²

During this critical moment for the Balkans, it remains to be seen how the Trump administration will engage, and whether it will continue as a supportive ally, or yield to an ascendant Russia. There is cause for concern, as not only is Russia exercising its soft and hard power in a number of Balkan states, but there is also a growing presence of the Gulf States, China, and an autocratic Turkey, all filling the vacuum that has emerged. The EU remains challenged by the ongoing Brexit crisis in London and will require disciplined engagement in this politically volatile Balkan environment to effectively prevent potential escalation that could lead to even greater political instability. A recalibration of EU policy is more important than ever, now that U.S. policy is so unpredictable. Given Trump’s erratic approach to foreign policy, a more focused and invigorated EU presence in the region could be the best outcome for the moment.

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