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The Rise of Trump and Its Global Implications

The Trump Doctrine Thus Far: Neither Rhyme Nor Reason

By Harry Sa

Synopsis

President-elect Donald Trump uses the mantle of unpredictability to disguise his foreign policy intentions. However behind his missteps the incoming Trump administration has no consistent worldview from which to fashion a coherent strategy. It is more prudent to expect US foreign policy to be reactive, piecemeal, and improvised.

Commentary

WITH LESS than a month before the start of Donald Trump's presidency one thing has become abundantly clear: American foreign policy is going to experience a dramatic but unpredictable shift. From NATO to Israel, policies that were once inviolate seem more pliable than ever. A Trumpian foreign policy will be one of surprises, uncertainty, and volatility, expected of a man who embraces unpredictability as a virtue.

Because he has been careful to cultivate the image of a man playing his cards close to his chest, some experts and analysts have ascribed to Trump some sort of vague Machiavellian quality to make sense of his decision-making. His phone call with President Tsai Ing-wen has been rationalised as playing some sort of a Taiwan card. However, there is a much simpler explanation: President-elect Donald Trump and his administration have no consistent worldview to formulate a coherent foreign policy.

America's Next Top Diplomat, Season 1

One of the earliest signs of the Trump administration's lack of vision for the world was its frantic search for the country's top diplomat. It was more reminiscent of Trump's beauty pageants and reality TV shows. The country was captivated as the pool of candidates ballooned to ten names, all with dissimilar backgrounds, qualifications, and values. To complicate the situation further, the candidates' policy stances often deviated from Trump's campaign pledges.

For example, former US Ambassador to the UN John Bolton was a committed interventionist despite Trump's penchant for isolationism. Senator Bob Corker is a strong supporter of the Iran nuclear deal which Trump disses. Governor Mitt Romney would have been a relatively reasonable choice, but is an embodiment of the establishment that Trump so vehemently opposed.

One could blame political infighting, mistrust, or inexperience as the culprits for this fiasco, but the real reason is likely that Trump had no concrete idea of how to approach this world, much less find the right individual to represent his administration's policies. Finally, the search ended, not with a bang, but with a whimper as Trump tapped an unknown, ExxonMobil CEO Rex Tillerson, based on recommendations of former Bush officials.

The First 50 Days

Even before 2016 was in the history books, the president-elect has already been tested numerous times on the world stage. The first round of tests came immediately after his surprise victory in November. After spending the entire campaign railing against the expense of protecting Asian allies, Trump called South Korean President Park Geun-hye and reaffirmed the alliance and the US' commitment to the Korean peninsula.

A week later, Trump personally met with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and reportedly had a productive and cordial meeting. Prime Minister Abe left New York "convinced Mr. Trump is a leader in whom I can have great confidence". A few days after, the president-elect announced his plans to withdraw from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, a huge blow to Abe's political standing in Japan.

The phone conversation with Pakistani Prime Minister Muhammad Nawaz Sharif was also unexpected given Trump's views on Islam and terrorism. A readout of the call from the Prime Minister's office shows Donald Trump waxing poetic about Pakistan's potential and that Trump is "ready and willing to play any role" required of him to reach that potential. Gone are any concerns over Pakistan providing a haven for Al Qaeda and consistently being accused of training Islamist militants to attack India. This is also amid rising tensions between the two South Asian nuclear powers and a budding relationship between India and the US.

In a departure from decades of presidential protocol, Trump startled the world by accepting a phone call from Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen. While Vice President-elect Mike Pence described it as a simple and routine congratulatory call,

staff-members of both presidents said this was a call that was mutually agreed upon. Despite the Vice President-elect's assurances, there was nothing routine about this call. Instead, it was meant to send a clear and obvious message: Donald Trump is going to shake things up. Then, the question is just how will he do this?

Trump's only consistent foreign policy stance, his admiration for Russia's President Vladimir Putin, is also the most perplexing. The latest test of Trump's diplomatic nous is the expulsion of 35 Russian diplomats from the US by outgoing President Obama for their alleged involvement in the November elections which Moscow has denied and for which President Putin has refrained from any retaliation pending Trump's taking office.

Interpreting Trump's Foreign Policy

Instead of suggesting the direction of Donald Trump's foreign policy, these early tests have only compounded the confusion. There is no pattern, vision, or grand strategy. He has proved time and time again that his campaign speeches are unreliable indicators. Now, with only a few weeks left until Donald Trump's inauguration as the 45th President of the United States, observers are still struggling to understand what his foreign policy will look like: A very alarming state.

At least for the first few phases of his presidency, given his lack of experience, Trump will take a "learn on the job" approach. During this period, the US will undoubtedly be tested by other powers. The Trump Doctrine will consist of dealing with these contingencies on a piecemeal and ad-hoc basis. Until the Trump administration formulates a coherent strategy, American foreign policy will become more reactive. The number of tense situations and political gaffes are expected to rise, especially if President Trump is allowed continued use of his Twitter account.

Partners and allies can rely on institutional inertia to maintain some of their ties with the US. However, even the most intimate relationships will be tested, and for the time being, will be forced to wait for a genuine foreign policy to emerge. This will be an ideal time for those partners and allies to diversify their security and economic relations. Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines have already exhibited signs of doing so. The international system is not so easily changed, which will provide some semblance of continuity. Nevertheless, judging from Trump's first 50 days, we are headed towards unpredictable and vexing times.

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