

## Scaling the wall of Trump's doctrine

**Few people were prepared for Donald Trump's stunning victory in the US presidential election last year. Now, as a new administration enters the White House, Selwyn Parker attempts to make sense of the Trump doctrine**

Selwyn Parker

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As President-elect Donald Trump approaches his inauguration on January 20, world leaders are no doubt wondering with some apprehension how an America led by a property developer and reality television star will act on the world stage.

After all, there's no precedent in modern times for a political novice with little international experience occupying the White House at such an unusually complex and tense period. And yet organisations such as the G20 will expect the new president to have effective ideas for a delicately poised world with much of the Middle East and North Africa in turmoil, an Asia-Pacific region concerned about China's claim to most of the South China Sea, a shaky eurozone, international terrorism on the rise, a muscle-flexing Russia, and the urgencies of global warming.

In short, will a Trump administration have an international or xenophobic perspective on these and other pressing issues that, by definition, require the full engagement of the US? Based on the candidate's campaign speeches, here's what we know.

Taking the terrorism threat first – if only because Trump hammered it to death while on the campaign trail – the fight against jihadists would go up several notches. “Containing the spread of radical Islam must be a major foreign policy goal of the United States”, he announced at frequent intervals.

This would occur on several fronts. Assuming the president-elect means what he says, ISIS would be bombed out of its various strongholds and “extreme Muslims” would be expelled from the US. Co-operation with countries that have produced radical Muslims would cease forthwith. By implication, these would include Belgium, the UK, France, most of North Africa, much of sub-Saharan Africa, and parts of the Asia-Pacific, among other regions and countries that, deliberately or inadvertently, have harboured jihadists in the past. However, provided they cooperate fully, Trump's America would also work with “our allies in the Muslim world”.

Second, America would re-arm rapidly. Impatient with what he decries as President Barack Obama's “gutting” of the US' nuclear arsenal and running down of the armed forces, the incoming president said: “Our ultimate deterrent... is in need of modernisation and renewal.” In terms of firepower, Trump clearly sees his mission as restoring the US to the status of the

world's greatest military force: "The Russians and Chinese have rapidly expanded their military capability, but look what's happened to us."

Furthermore, America's allies would be expected to foot a greater share of the bill. Claiming the US has borne the brunt of defence spending that's now protecting Asia and Europe, Trump would require other countries to boost their defence budgets if they ever want help from America. For instance, he has argued only four of NATO's 28 member countries are spending the obligatory two percent of gross domestic product on their armed forces. If they don't take more responsibility, he warned, "the US must let these countries defend themselves". On the same subject, he warned that America would take a long, hard look at its defence treaties with Japan and South Korea, among others.

### **A bad deal for America**

In matters of trade, Trump has foreshadowed a modern version of isolationism, in spite of the overwhelming evidence of the benefits of the free global exchange of goods. He has already repudiated the Trans-Pacific Partnership (calling it "a terrible deal"), which had just been agreed between 12 Pacific Rim countries, excluding China. He has also slammed the 22-year-old North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) between the US, Canada and Mexico for "emptying" the US of jobs. He also appears to hold the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in scorn.

The incoming president's rationale for setting up import duties against other countries' goods is that President Obama's "open borders" policy has created a \$1trn trade deficit in manufacturing, with the rest of the world having stolen countless jobs from Americans. This statistic is questionable, to say the least. "We're rebuilding other countries while weakening our own", he argued.

But, as the respected independent Washington-based think tank Cato Institute warned: "His threat to dismantle NAFTA and to use import duties to force our trading partners to bend to his will would tank any economic recovery and have severe constitutional implications."

In trade, as in its wider relationships with the outside world, America hasn't been tough enough for Trump's liking. As he put it: "In negotiation you must be willing to walk. The Iran [nuclear] deal, like so many of our worst agreements, is the result of not being willing to leave the table. When the other side knows you're not going to walk, it becomes absolutely impossible to win."

On the positive side, he added: "At the same time, your friends need to know that you will stick by the agreements that you have with them."

Third, in all his administration's decisions, the interests of America will come first, second and last. "I will view the world through the clear lens of American interests", he promised to thunderous cheers on the campaign trail. "I will be America's greatest defender and most loyal champion."

Trump's repeated references to "America first" concerned other world leaders, as it amounts to a complete reversal of Obama's US foreign policy, which has engaged much more fully and openly with the outside world than that of the Bush administration. The subtext behind "America first" is Trump's conviction that the interests of the nation state should triumph over

transnational organisations – never mind that these bodies have been created to harmonise the efforts of individual countries in the achievement of mutually beneficial goals.

As we've seen, Trump has little respect for the WTO. But many commentators believe his low regard for transnational bodies may extend to NATO, financial organisations such as the World Bank and the IMF (both of which rely greatly on US support), and perhaps even to political organisations such as the UN and EU. "I am sceptical of international unions that tie us up and bring America down", he said. "I will never enter America into any agreement that reduces our ability to control our own affairs."

To many, that sounds very much as though he's got no patience with the UN – an organisation which, it is claimed, frequently ties American hands.

### **Taking down the bogey states**

In Trump's worldview, there are 'bogey' nation states: China, for one, cropped up frequently during his campaign. He virtually blamed the entirety of America's purported haemorrhage of jobs on the nation, accusing it of supporting North Korea (roughly 90 percent of the latter's trade is with China). Indulging in some additional Obama-bashing, Trump also blamed the president for "allowing China to continue its economic assault on American jobs and wealth, refusing to enforce trade rules or apply the leverage on China necessary to rein in North Korea". As a result, Trump told voters, China had lost all respect for America.

On safer ground, he also faults the Obama administration for allowing China to "steal government secrets with cyber attacks and engage in industrial espionage against the United States and its companies". Although that's generally true – as experts on cyber attacks unanimously agree – it's also true that the Pentagon and other similar agencies run active worldwide espionage campaigns that are considered to be at least as effective as those of China. Iran is another enemy of Trump's America (he would immediately dismantle its nuclear capability, for instance) – and so, of course, is Mexico, because so many of its citizens live illegally across the border.

To Russia, by contrast, he has handed an olive branch. During his election campaign, Trump expressed admiration for Vladimir Putin and said he was looking forward to meeting Russia's sanctions-hit president. This has worried some commentators, who cite the Russian leader's guile and cunning. "Does [this mutual admiration] mean US-Russia relations will suddenly be repaired, giving Putin a free hand in Europe and a proxy in the White House?" international lawyer and political commentator Robert Amsterdam asked in November. "Not so fast."

But we might find out all too soon: Amsterdam fears Putin could move quickly to test the boundaries of his relationship with the Trump White House by invading, for example, the Baltic countries, thereby drawing Trump into a trap "in which confrontation with Russia is unavoidable". As financial and other sanctions over the invasion of Ukraine bite deeper into the Kremlin, the fear is Putin could strike in the early weeks of the Trump presidency, before the incumbent has his feet firmly under the table.

Until – or if – that happens, the new president believes he could strike a rapport with Putin. “Some say the Russians won’t be reasonable”, he said. “I intend to find out. If we can’t make a good deal for America, then we will quickly walk from the table.”

But despite his aggressive rhetoric, Trump insists he’s not spoiling for a fight with nations he doesn’t count as friends: “We desire to live peacefully and in friendship with Russia and China. We have serious differences with these two nations, and must regard them with open eyes, but we are not bound to be adversaries.” He cited common ground with Russia, for instance, based on shared interests including the fight against Islamic terrorism.

But if he openly dislikes some countries, Trump has a soft spot for others. Israel – “one of our greatest allies” – would certainly qualify, and so would Scotland, the birthplace of his mother and the home of the Trump golf course near Aberdeen.

But so far, at least, his worldview does not encompass Europe or the Asia-Pacific. And it certainly doesn’t embrace Latin America, for which he has not articulated a coherent policy – if you exclude the running battle with Mexico over the infamous wall that would be built (by Mexico, insists Trump) to keep “illegals” out. It is a strategy that contributed to the rapid drop in the Mexican peso’s value during election night in November (*see Fig 1*).

### **True or false?**

In any examination of the entrails of what has euphemistically been described as the ‘Trump doctrine’, the problem is whether the president-elect meant what he said in the run-up to his stunning election victory – or whether he was simply saying what he wanted voters to hear. Certainly, the soon-to-be 45th president’s various expositions of foreign policy were riddled with errors. The question is whether these were deliberate or not.

As several news organisations hastened to point out, he was plain wrong in some assumptions, half-right in others, and on the mark in very few. For example, he promised the US will put a stop to the “era of nation-building” – that is, attempts to install democracies in Iraq and Afghanistan – that Obama had allegedly practised. In fact, as ABC News noted, the statement was “mostly false”, because Obama had actually phased out most of the large-scale nation-building efforts that originated with the Bush administration.

Trump also repeatedly misrepresented his own position on some big issues, such as the war in Iraq. He insisted throughout the campaign he had opposed the invasion from the beginning, despite the fact, as ABC News reminded him, that he’d sat on the fence. Other news organisations proved he had supported the invasion of Libya, even though he repeatedly lambasted Hillary Clinton for allegedly prosecuting the war that toppled Gaddafi. They also cited several falsehoods about the role of the Obama administration in the coup in Egypt in 2013, and other upheavals in North Africa during the ‘Arab Spring’ of 2010.

Overall, most commentators declare themselves perplexed and confused by Trump’s views of the world beyond the Statue of Liberty. Describing one speech, popular current affairs site Vox Media fulminated: “The bulk of it was dedicated to demagoguery, xenophobia and bizarre lies about status quo immigration policy in the United States and Hilary Clinton’s proposals for gun regulation.”

However, according to his audience, Trump can change tack. When, for instance, the Prime Minister of Pakistan, Muhammad Nawaz Sharif, called to congratulate him on his election victory, Trump was pleasantly effusive, despite Pakistan being one of the countries that would be on his banned list for harbouring terrorists. According to the Pakistani Government's transcript of the conversation, the incoming president told the prime minister he was "a terrific guy" who was "doing amazing work" in "an amazing country with tremendous opportunities". Further, "all Pakistanis I have known are exceptional people".

And, far from informing his caller that he regarded Pakistan as a rogue nation, Trump told the probably-startled prime minister that he was "ready and willing to play any role that you want me to play" to address his nation's problems.

### **The global superpower**

If Donald Trump is true to his rhetoric, world leaders should expect him to behave as though America is the world's superpower with the dominant role in global politics. Indeed, his "America first" motto has led him to make exaggerated claims about his country's role in world affairs. For instance, he appears to believe America won the Second World War single-handed: "We have a lot to be proud of. In the 1940s, we saved the world", he insisted in April last year. "The Greatest Generation [a description he borrowed from a 1998 book about Depression-era soldiers] beat back the Nazis and the Japanese imperialists." Though, as countless war historians have pointed out, this statement completely ignores the contribution of the other Allied powers.

Trump also stated as fact that Mikhail Gorbachev acted under instructions from Ronald Reagan when the Soviet Union was dismantled. "Then we saved the world again, this time from totalitarian Communism", he declared. "The Cold War lasted for decades, but we won."

Because of sweeping and frequently inaccurate statements such as these, foreign policy specialists are nervous of how the new president will act and behave in the future. "It's impossible to tell from his stated agenda what his foreign policy would actually look like", noted Vox Media. "But it's easy to see that it's going to be a muddle driven by impulse and catch phrases, unguided by actual understanding or reliance on the support of anyone who has it."

Others are slightly more sanguine, suggesting Trump will be more pragmatic once he takes office. "Trump's foreign policy will be much more fluid than anticipated, but we are still potentially looking at some fundamental, tectonic shifts in the post-Second World War international system", predicted Amsterdam.

Surprisingly, business and finance professionals in Shanghai and Hong Kong are also optimistic. According to a poll conducted by the deVere fund management group two weeks after Trump's election victory, a healthy majority of 650 top executives believed the new president will have "a positive effect on the world economy", citing Trump's expected dismantling of some of the regulations imposed on Wall Street and his softer attitude to global warming, which, they expect, will boost the extractive industries. There's also talk that he may emasculate the FATCA tax evasion laws that are widely resented in several regions, including the Asia-Pacific.

They could also have mentioned Trump's promise of individual and corporate tax cuts. Along with regulatory reform, these "hold great promise", according to the Cato Institute. But whatever

Trump's foreign policy turns out to be, it will certainly be diametrically different from that of the Obama administration. "Our foreign policy is a complete and total disaster", Trump said of the current regime. "[It has] no vision, no purpose, no direction, no strategy." The big question is what it will be replaced with.

### **Part-term president**

Hovering over the 45th president is the possibility he may not last a full term. Even as he prepares to take office, a powerful groundswell of opposition is building against his policies, his personality and his lack of the popular vote (*see Fig 2*). In late November, the left-wing magazine *The Nation* began organising a full-scale, America-wide, volunteer-led campaign with the sole purpose of destroying a Trump presidency. *The Nation* sees this as nothing more nor less than a mission to save the country. It said: "Passionate, moral and urgent opposition to Trumpism could represent the greatest opportunity for mass participation in politics since the anti-war movement of a half-century ago."

There's also serious opposition in government circles, even from within Trump's own party. Insiders report a powerful bloc within the Grand Old Party is so concerned about the damage a loose-cannon president – if, indeed, that is what Trump turns into – will do to the Republicans that they feel they cannot support him, or the party will be tainted by association and lose all chance of winning the election in another four years' time.

One thing is for certain: if President Trump lasts the distance, it will undoubtedly be a turbulent four years.