

Analysis

The Trump effect on US foreign policy

How will foreign policy change after the 2016 elections?

Roberta Haar

No matter who wins, the 2016 American presidential election will be defined by its rejection of establishment candidates and the electorate's embrace of insurgents, who openly waged war on their own parties. Certainly, Donald Trump secured the Republican nomination by disagreeing with his party's mainstream members on many core issues, in particular foreign policy. The Democratic Party had its own insurgent, Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders, who did not win the primary but whose popularity, like Trump's, emerged from disagreeing with the traditional Democratic Party on key foreign policy stances. If Donald Trump wins the American election on the 8th of November, US foreign policy will certainly be transformed, but even if he loses US foreign policy is likely to undergo significant change. This is because insurgents matter.

This article explores how various outcomes of the US elections will affect the conduct of American foreign policy, in particular towards Europe. But no matter who wins the American presidential election, US foreign policy is in for a change.

Contemplating the unimaginable

First, if against all rational predictions, Donald J. Trump wins the presidency. In this case, the outlook for Europe, just as the US domestic outlook, and indeed the world, is worrisome. This scenario is distressing because Trump does not appear to have any interests in becoming president outside of actually winning office. His campaign consists of unabashed rhetoric while his relationship to policy advisers and decision-makers is feeble. His rejection of decades of Republican Party thinking, and his own neo-isolationist views about America's role in the world, mean that there are few Republican foreign policy specialists who will put aside their own beliefs and serve in his potential administration.

The second reason why a Trump administration might be a disaster emerges from the fact that he is a consummate outsider. This means that Trump is unlikely to establish a rapport with congressional Republicans, let alone Democrats and, thus, he is unlikely to ever be able to govern domestically or engage in a foreign policy acceptable to most members of Congress. While it is true that the role of the executive has grown over the years, the US is still a republic that requires cooperation between the branches of its government.

A third reason why the future of America foreign policy looks grim if Trump wins relates to what Trump says in his stump speeches and soft media appearances. If you sift through his secret plans, conspiracy theories, bombastic vague threats and incendiary pronouncements, you can distill stances that repudiate the international system that has defined the world order since the Second World War ended. Trump advocates an American foreign policy that returns it to an isolationist stance characterized by unfulfilled alliance promises. He has repeatedly made threats to pull the American military back from NATO Europe, Japan and

South Korea, while at the same time encouraging these long-standing American allies to arm themselves with nuclear weapons.

Thus, under a Trump administration NATO will fray, with Europeans not sure if Trump supports anything multilateral, whether it be their own experiment in multilateral cooperation (he applauded Brexit), or other global US created post-war institutions that Europeans have come to rely upon for stable economics and politics. Of all the postwar institutions that Trump seems to dislike NATO stands out for particular derision, with Trump suggesting that he would not come to the assistance of fellow NATO allies if Russia were to invade their territories and moreover, he thinks that it is perhaps time to leave the alliance altogether. Trump seems to be unaware of the lessons learned by leaders such as Franklin Delano Roosevelt that America's retreat to the isolationist position after WWI and in the 1930s did not provide it security. In fact, all postwar American presidents understood that there is no safety in isolationism and that the structures ensuring peace are quite fragile. Trump also seems to ignore or abhor the indispensable role that the deployment of American power has played in the maintenance of global stability.

Trainable or containable?

The rosier scenario of a Trump presidency is that he becomes quickly bored with the day-to-day tasks of the Executive Branch, prompting him to delegate the actual duties of the job to members of his cabinet. After all, Donald Trump Jr. asked Governor John Kasich after he dropped out of the presidential race to consider whether Kasich had "any interest in being the most powerful Vice President in history" by which Trump Jr. meant that Kasich would be in charge of domestic and foreign policy.¹ The figurehead presidential role was reinforced by Trump's campaign chairman Paul Manafort, who said that Trump will "not read briefing papers" and that he wants his Vice President to be "an experienced person to do the part of the job he doesn't want to do," which apparently includes foreign and domestic policy.²

Assuming that Trump is encouraged to pick knowledgeable and experienced advisers, the most benign scenario is a US foreign policy conducted by official cabinet members or even a Kitchen Cabinet of unofficial experts that attempt to steer a more Republican-mainstream policy while the presidential role resembles Italy's Silvio Berlusconi. As Christopher M. Livaccari and Jeff Wang point out in *Foreign Policy*, "It is perhaps no accident that Mr. Trump seems to be more popular in Italy than in other places in Europe, particularly among supporters of Mr. Berlusconi."³

In such a scenario, Trump's vice presidential running mate, Indiana Governor Mike Pence, might provide the set of core foreign policy ideas and act as a sort of "voice of reason" playing down Trump's oratorical excesses. In the October 4th vice presidential debate, Pence elucidated positions on nuclear weapons, Russia and Syria that were more in line with traditional Republican views. However, Pence's positions were contradictory to bold statements that Trump made on these same topics, which leads to the troubling question: when the really big issues are on the table would a President Trump yield to his Kitchen Cabinet of experts or would he make key foreign policy decisions himself? The saddest part of this scenario is that it is the one most hoped for by Republicans that currently support Trump's campaign to become president. Their dreams are that a President Trump would be trainable and, if not, at least containable.

The more likely scenario

The more likely scenario is that Clinton wins the presidency. Predicting the foreign policy of a Clinton presidency is far easier because she has a track record of her time in the Senate (for example, on the Armed Services Committee) and as Barack Obama's Secretary of State. Clinton's foreign policy views certainly fall in what might be labeled mainstream Democratic Party positions, but this does not mean that she will pick up where Obama left off. Indeed, in many respects Clinton's foreign policy significantly differs from Obama's. For example, while Secretary of State she lost an intense policy battle within the administration over whether to arm and train moderate Syrian rebels and later, after she left the administration, she publicly stated that she supported a no-fly zone in Syria to protect civilians and stop the flow of refugees.

Clinton's differences with Obama led to her inclusion in a group that Deputy National Security Adviser for Strategic Communications Ben Rhodes called "The Blob," or that part of the Obama National Security Council that advocated a policy that maintained a strong American security order in Europe and the Middle East.⁴ While Rhodes may have a long and rather underwhelming title, he is one of Obama's closest advisers on foreign policy. White House colleagues whisper that Rhodes has a "mind meld" with Obama.

Other members of "The Blob" include former Secretaries of Defense Bob Gates, Leon Panetta and Chuck Hagel, all politicians that Europeans understand and could have a constructive, if not always pleasant, dialogue with about future shared issues. General David Petraeus and various other Washington-foreign-policy-establishment types were also part of "The Blob," according to Rhodes. What do all of these individuals have in common? They hold what might be called a liberal internationalist world view that believes in American liberal hegemony and that America has a mission beyond its narrowly-defined national interest — what has at varying times been called America's role as the *indispensable nation*. While Europeans may at times find such a viewpoint paternalistic, it is nevertheless a concept that they are familiar with and begrudgingly recognize as valid.

As a liberal internationalist, Clinton also views the military as a legitimate instrument for attaining America's foreign policy goals. For example, while she was Secretary of State Clinton was part of an intense policy battle within the Obama administration over whether to support General Stanley McChrystal's surge of 40,000 troops to Afghanistan. Clinton also opposed Obama's setting of a public date for withdrawal of those troops from Afghanistan. Her support of the military as an instrument also means that Clinton is likely to continue Obama's recent investment in NATO through enhancing the capabilities of the *Very High Readiness Joint Task Force* (VJTF) and through further funding of the *European Reassurance Initiative*, which was allocated \$789 million in 2016.

On the negative side, her strong support of the military instrument may have contributed to over-militarizing the problems in Afghanistan while her proposals for a civilian surge (she was America's top diplomat after all) never materialized. It should also be acknowledged that like her husband, she is ever-mindful of opinion polls, so perhaps she will find that Obama is right that foreign policy statements as a candidate and as president are two different situations and she will be more deliberate, like Obama, once she is in office. Indeed, while she was a rather hawkish Senator and Secretary of State, she was also known

for her pragmatism and her commitment to incremental improvement, characteristics that Europeans will appreciate.

The insurgents win no matter what

But, no matter who wins, the 2016 American presidential election will be defined by its rejection of establishment candidates and the electorate's embrace of insurgents, who overtly disagreed with their own parties' long-held foreign policy positions. Trump won the primary race and secured the Republican nomination by bluntly opposing Republican foreign-policy professionals over such topics as whether free trade is beneficial for the American economy and whether the United States should adopt a more isolationist stance. Such differences divided the party and led some Republican elites to argue that Trump engineered a hostile takeover of their party, which in turn necessitated a break-up of the Grand Old Party (GOP) in order to mount a third-party challenge against him.

Obviously, this late in the game such a challenge will not materialize. Nevertheless, a Trump loss is likely to split the Republican Party. For one, it is hard to see those Republicans who voted for Trump reconciling their differences with those Republicans who voted for Clinton, such as the members of the Bush political dynasty. Those who voted for Clinton are prone to break away and form their own political movement.

But even if the Republican Party avoids splintering, the Trumpites' revolt will impact the GOP and its stance on foreign policy for years to come because in periods of political cynicism and anti-establishment fervor insurgent candidates can have profound effects on the conduct of foreign policy. Already in 1942, V.O. Key described insurgencies as the means by which those disenchanted with the party establishment champion reform.⁵ Insurgents emerge because the party's center of gravity is so far removed from the issue preferences of the party's agitators, who want to change the party's positions. At the same time, party professionals may worry about the issue integrity of a party they no longer feel is their own and as a result may leave their party.⁶

In fact, it is not the first time that an insurgent candidate was accused of taking over a political party during a presidential campaign or that foreign policy was a key divisive issue in the election. Forty years ago, Senator George McGovern of South Dakota, whose primary reason for running for president was his opposition to the Vietnam War, clashed with the foreign policy beliefs of "professional" Democrats.⁷ In 1972, as in 2016, voters across the electoral spectrum expressed a deep-rooted revulsion against big government and a distrust of the establishment. In October 1972, the American editor of *The Economist* wrote, "Mr. McGovern's greatest advantage in the primary campaign was to be running for the Presidency without the backing of Democratic party officials."⁸

But broad electoral support in the primaries did not prove sustainable for McGovern as rejection to his candidacy began to fragment the Democratic Party into several groups that differed significantly in their foreign-policy views, including those professional foreign policy Democrats who left the party in the 1970s and 1980s and became neoconservatives. Whether one approves of neoconservative ideas or not, it is a fact that following their formation as a separate group neoconservatives became a powerful force shaping American

foreign policy for many years, especially during the Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush presidencies.

In 1972, the leaders of the Democratic Party thought that McGovern's "far-out views on Vietnam" meant that his chances of winning the nomination were "next to zero."⁹ Perhaps the professionals in the party were not paying attention to an electorate that questioned the integrity of establishment officials, with fully 58 percent of Americans stating in 1972 that they thought the US government operated in a manner more beneficial to special interests than to the general public.¹⁰ Nor were Democratic bosses paying attention to the agitators in their own party who wanted a radical transformation of foreign policy. History has shown that when party professionals ignore such prevailing attitudes they do so at the expense of their party's unity on key issues.

Of course, in the 2016 race the Democratic Party had its own insurgent, who did not win the primary campaign, but who certainly shared some of Trump's anti-globalization foreign policy views. But true to the effects of the insurgent candidate, Sanders' more McGovern-like "Come Home America" isolationism has clearly pulled Clinton's policy stance in that direction as well. For example, in the first debate-like event in which Clinton went up against Trump on the 7th of September 2016, she said she would not put ground troops back into Iraq ever again and nor would she put ground troops into Syria, when actually Obama already had troops on the ground in both countries. Clinton's convenient forgetfulness is surely the result of pressure from Sanders' insurgency. Indeed, in a major foreign policy speech at the Council on Foreign Relations in November 2015 she had previously indicated a readiness to expand the operation against ISIS by sending in more special forces to Syria and Iraq. Sanders' views on trade and the effects of globalization also resulted in Clinton vowing to block trades deals like the Trans Pacific Partnership that she once strongly backed.

The insurgent that just won't go away

Finally, no one should think that Donald J. Trump plans to go away when he loses the election. In fact, there are reports that Trump's whole plan in running for the presidency was to launch a "Trump TV" media venture.¹¹ Of course, the campaign denies that any such plans exist. Nevertheless, no one can disagree with the fact that Trump's presidential run has garnered the boastful businessman tremendous amounts of free airtime and media coverage, a strategy not unlike putting his name on buildings that he does not own. Both are tactics that build up his brand in the process. Witness the recent made-for-Trump-moment when he baited the national press with promises to repeat his charge that Obama was not born in America, but instead spent several minutes of live air time talking about his new hotel. Any secret plans to launch a media empire will be aided by the fact that Trump's son-in-law already runs a media platform. The Trump campaign's affiliation with Fox News' disgraced CEO Roger Ailes and Breitbart News' Stephen Bannon, a man who has no experience in running political campaigns, but much experience in media, also point to media goals beyond the election.

Add to these facts the feeling that Trump's media stunts suggest a candidate that really does not want to win. Perhaps Trump looks at his friend UK Independence Party leader Nigel Farage and recognizes a trap that he does not want to be in: unexpectedly winning your campaign and then not knowing what to do. Instead a "Crooked Hillary" win would

allow him to say she won because the system was rigged, in turn, permitting Trump to establish the platform on which he could broadcast his fight against the corrupt “establishment” Clinton administration.

A new media empire that continued to exploit for personal gain the underlying forces that defied the Republican Party’s traditional center of gravity would certainly put pressure on an already fragmented GOP, making it more likely that it breaks apart into new groups that hold different views on American foreign policy. Perhaps one group will emerge from the dust and form a strong advocacy coalition, just like the neoconservatives did when they left the Democratic Party in the wake of the McGovern insurgency. Ironically, those foreign policy professionals who are most likely to leave the Republican Party following Trump’s insurgency are the neoconservatives. Where will they find their new home? Might neoconservatives finally *come home* to the Democratic Party, some four decades after they left it?

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¹ Robert Draper, “How Donald Trump Picked His Running Mate,” *The New York Times Magazine* (20 July 2016).

² Howard Fineman, “Donald Trump’s Top Adviser,” *The Huffington Post* (26 May 2016).

³ Christopher M. Livaccari and Jeff Wang, “Trump’s Tower of Babble,” *Foreign Policy* (30 August 2016).

⁴ David Samuels, “The Aspiring Novelist Who Became Obama’s Foreign-Policy Guru,” *The New York Times Magazine* (5 May 2016).

⁵ V.O. Key Jr., *Politics, Parties, and Pressure Groups* (Binghamton, NY: Thomas Crowell Company, 1952).

⁶ Jeffrey L. Pressman and Denis G. Sullivan, “Convention Reform and Conventional Wisdom: An Empirical Assessment of Democratic Reforms,” *Political Science Quarterly* 89 (Autumn 1974): 539-562.

⁷ John J. Havick, “Amateurs & Professionals at the 1972 Democratic Convention,” *Polity* 10 (Spring 1978): 448-457.

⁸ Nancy Balfour, “America’s Presidential Election,” *The World Today* 28 (October 1972): 434.

⁹ “Despite the Odds,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 7 (Jul. 22, 1972): 1405-1406.

¹⁰ Arthur H. Miller and Warren E. Miller, “Issues, Candidates and Partisan Divisions in the 1972 American Presidential Election,” *British Journal of Political Science* 5 (Oct. 1975):404.

¹¹ Nora Kelly, “Can Trump TV Succeed?” *The Atlantic* (18 June 2016).