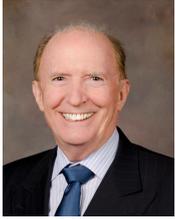


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What Now for American Foreign Policy?

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The surprise election of Donald J. Trump as the 45th president of the United States has raised far more questions than it has answered about the nation's future. It has also, not unnaturally, discomfited (or at least confused) friends and allies abroad. To try judging what President Trump will do in foreign policy, we should return to "first principles."

First, this election did not turn on foreign policy issues. U.S. elections never do, not in my own more than half-century in the business of politics and foreign affairs. There is only one exception, and that is trade, where both Hillary Clinton (tentatively) and Donald Trump (at high decibels) criticized the deals the United States has already cut and those our Asian and European friends hope to complete as the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP). Both are now in serious trouble and will at least be "renegotiated."

The second principle flows from the first. The tide of popular opinion that has swept the Clinton family from public life requires the new president to focus on what needs to be done at home. "America's interests first," Donald Trump said in his victory speech, and he clearly meant it in two ways: not just regarding judgments he will make about foreign policy but about prioritizing matters at home.

A third principle derives from the widespread view that campaign promises are made to be broken. With domestic policy, this often requires some heavy political work, because interest-group constituencies and Congress are both involved, with their own wants and needs and demands for a role in the process. But in foreign policy, the president retains a great deal of latitude. Since these issues don't determine success or failure at the polls, he can generally go one way or another without a great hue and cry by the electorate.

Of course, there is currently both need and value in proclaiming that the United States is preeminent in the world, a need generated by the inevitable loss of the degree of influence it exercised during the Cold War. But that is more fluff than substance, to be dealt with in rhetoric more than reality.

There is one big exception to this third principle: decisions to go to war or, more generally, to use military force. Trump has articulated what might seem to be contradictory positions. On the one hand, he has called for rebuilding the US military—a matter primarily of satisfying both public perceptions of American greatness and demands by economic actors who depend on military spending. On the other hand, in the campaign Trump appealed to the one major element of the national mood that relates to the reality of engagement abroad rather than to the psychology of American global influence: there is no popular appetite for more foreign wars.

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For domestic political reasons, Trump beat up on Iran during the campaign, saying that he will renegotiate (“scrap”) President Barack Obama’s nuclear deal with that country. The Israel and Arab lobbies will press him hard to do so - certainly to confront and contain Iran on their behalf. It is not clear whether Trump will resist these pressures, even though he will not want to increase the risk of conflict – a fine line to walk. Nor is he likely to increase US military involvement in Syria, as Hillary Clinton proposed to do. At the same time, he has stressed that he will continue the national commitment to countering terrorism, now centered on the Islamic State. In the Middle East, generally, he is less beholden than was Clinton to domestic constituencies pushing for greater military activity.

Much has been made of Trump’s comments about allies, and especially those in NATO, plus his so-called bromance with Russian President Vladimir Putin. This was a major theme of Hillary Clinton’s attacks on Trump’s judgment. It was linked, as well, to the highly publicized allegations of Russian attempts to interfere in the US electoral process.

But a careful look at what Trump actually said does not fully support these concerns. Regarding the defense of European allies against Russian aggression, especially the Baltic States, it is true that he did not repeat the required mantra of unquestioned US fealty to the core provisions of the NATO Treaty’s Article 5. But his qualification had to do with first looking at whether these countries were “paying their bills.” Given that the Obama administration has also pressed NATO allies to increase defense spending, the *Sturm und Drang* over Trump’s comment was excessive.

Regarding Russia and Putin, the president-elect’s most relevant comment in his victory statement was the following: “I want to tell the world community that while we will always put America’s interests first, we will deal fairly with everyone, with everyone. All people and all other nations. We will seek common ground, not hostility; partnership, not conflict.... We will get along with all other nations willing to get along with us.”

Of course, these comments may only reflect his hopes. If Trump does make this his leitmotif, it can prove, in dealing with Putin, to have been naïve. But at least it is refreshing to hear a president-elect deviating from what is currently a major drift, in both Moscow and Washington, toward intensified confrontation.

Which leads to a final principle: that who President-elect Trump chooses for his team will be critically important in determining the direction he sets for the nation and the efficacy of his policies, abroad as well as at home. Quality people, able to think for themselves and give good, solid, strategically relevant advice to a president, exist in both political parties. They were largely absent from the past two administrations. As a person who emphasizes success and has a reputation for engaging talent, Trump can break from the shackles of the “establishment” and build a first-rate team. And if any of its members prove inadequate, he can always say: “You’re fired.”

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