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TRUMP'S FIRST YEAR AT THE HELM

TOWARDS A MORE COMPETITIVE WORLD?

Donald Trump's first year as President has been marked by continuity in US security policy, a partial challenge to the global principles of free trade, and a sea change in commitments to the liberal international order. These reflect a view of the international system as a zero-sum competitive realm.

Donald Trump's ascendancy to the White House centred on disruption. His America First agenda, replete with nationalistic views on America's place in the world, raised alarms amongst US allies and partners.

On the global stage, Trump's challenge was visible in at least three dimensions. First, in the security sphere, fears and suspicions of a great power grand bargain between the US and Russia proliferated in Europe, and the incoming President had also berated NATO for being "obsolete". Second, in the realm of trade, there was talk of the US abandoning planned and existing free trade agreements. Third, in light of Trump's stated preference for bilateral deals and a narrower view of America's national interests, it was expected that the new administration would pose a

constant challenge to the norms and institutions of the liberal international order.

Upon reflection, the first year of Trump's presidency has been exceptional, not least because of the President's Twitter outbursts and his ongoing feud with the media. In terms of America's global role, it has entailed both change and continuity, alleviating and heightening related fears in the process.

In the first dimension of security, talk of a US-Russia grand bargain has subsided due, in part, to investigations into the Trump campaign team's Russia contacts, use of legislative power by Congress, and the simple fact that Washington and Moscow continue to have diverging interests on various key international issues. America has also retained its security

commitments vis-à-vis Europe. In fact, the US has increased its security investment under the auspices of the European Deterrence Initiative and has decided to ship lethal defensive weapons to Ukraine. The President has admittedly been more outspoken than his predecessors in calling for more equitable burden sharing from NATO allies, but this is a message that US administrations have carried across the Atlantic for decades.

A similar dynamic of continuity has taken hold in the Asia-Pacific, where the US military alliances with Japan and South Korea continue to form key prongs of a strategy that largely resembles the "re-balance to Asia" that began during the Barack Obama years. Trump's stronger rhetoric on the need to contain China has also been read

as a sign of a traditional “hawkish” Republican security policy.

Reflecting these early indicators of continuity, the new National Defense Strategy (NDS), prepared by Secretary of Defense James Mattis, singled out “the re-emergence of long-term strategic competition” from China and Russia as “the central challenge to U.S. prosperity and security”.

In the second dimension of trade and economic policy, the Trumpian challenge has already materialised, albeit not to the extent initially feared. So far, America has abandoned the Trans-Pacific Partnership, arguably squandering a geoeconomic opportunity to emerge as the leading setter of rules and regulations of international trade in the Asia-Pacific region. Trump also launched a renegotiation process to update NAFTA, also retaining the prospect of US withdrawal from the free trade area. Although the US has recently increased tariffs on some imports, it has not yet resorted to wide-ranging measures to challenge what it perceives as China’s unfair trade practices – a move that could potentially spark a trade war between the economic giants.

A notable step change has also been articulated in the Trump administration’s National Security

Strategy (NSS), written under the guidance of National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster and unveiled in December 2017. The strategy explicitly acknowledges the geo-strategic challenges posed by Chinese infrastructure investments in third countries and Russian energy projects. This reflects the administration’s broader view of the global arena as a realm of competition, which takes place between sovereign states through different means of power (military, economic, diplomatic) in various domains (sea, air, space, cyber). Under Obama, these domains were regarded as humanity’s shared or common spaces, which the US has a duty to preserve and secure. The Trump administration takes a view grounded in political realism, which treats these commons as “tragically” compromised by power political competition. This means that the US should angle for a more dominant position in them.

The most noteworthy difference between Trump’s foreign policy and that of his immediate predecessor(s) can be seen in the third dimension: America’s commitment to the institutions and norms of the liberal international order. During the first year of his tenure, the US has signalled its intention to leave the Paris Climate Agreement and

UNESCO. Trump has also thrown the future of the Iran nuclear accord into limbo, and recognised Jerusalem as Israel’s capital, in defiance of the broad consensus within the international community.

The US has also been relatively quiet when it comes to the defence of core liberal values, such as human rights, freedom, the rule of law and democratic governance. Trump prefers to talk of the sovereignty of nations, patriotism and civilisation instead.

In sum, for the Trump team, the liberal vision of the international order remains hopelessly naive and misleading. The strategic focus has transformed from a US leadership role within the “win-win” world of the Obama era to Trump’s bleaker emphasis on the underlying competitive and zero-sum nature of the international system, where relative power gains are a must. Trump embraces a vision of an American-defined and US-led hierarchy of nations, where liberal values matter relatively less and harder forms of power much more. /