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Trump: The Vacuum in American Foreign Policy

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Since foreign policy is considered one of the main pillars of America's world supremacy, President Donald Trump has been seeking to re-shape it in a way befitting his outlook of 'America-first' and his promise to 'make America great again'. However, so far Trump's foreign policy plans remain uncertain and ambiguous in terms of what direction the administration intends to take in tackling foreign affairs. The ambiguity of Trump's foreign policy appears to derive from clashing viewpoints within his administration; between those adopting a populist, racist ideology and those adopting a more conservative-right perspective.

In addition, it seems there are ideas to restructure the foreign policy decision-making process being floated, in which the traditional role of the State Department will probably fall more in line with the White House. For the purposes of this paper I have divided the factors contributing to U.S. foreign policy under the Trump administration into four significant areas and I will discuss each one in turn.

1: Sharing of Power and Mutual Restrain

In their book on U.S. foreign policy, Michael Cox and Doug Stokes describe the U.S. system as "a complex model of power sharing and mutual restraint." In many cases foreign policy is subject to executively authorized assessments of the President. However, this does not mean that other political and legislative institutions do not interfere and influence the decision-making process.¹ In the same context, in his book 'American Foreign Policy' Bruce Gentelson argues that there are five key players which perform various roles in the foreign policy making process. These are the President, Congress, lobbyists, public opinion, and the media.²

¹ Cox, Michael; Stokes, Doug, 2012. US Foreign Policy. Second Edition. Oxford University Press: the United States. P.111

² Jentleson W., Bruce, 2010. American Foreign Policy: the Dynamics of Choice in the 21st Century. Fourth Edition. W.W Norton and Company: New York and London. P.29



The principle of power sharing and mutual restraint is clearly reflected in the dynamic that links both the President and Congress, particularly with regards to; declaration of war, signing of treaties, foreign trade and the appointment of members of cabinet and ambassadors. For example, the U.S. constitution grants the president the status of ‘Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces’, while entrusting Congress the authority to ‘declare war’ and decide the defence budget. As for the international conventions; the president is authorized to negotiate and draw-up contracts with international players, while the role of Congress is to ratify these treaties by vote, with a two-thirds majority needed for approval.

History shows that of the 2000 or so treaties signed by U.S. presidents, only 20 have been rejected by Congress. The most notable of these was the Treaty of Versailles in 1919, shortly after the First World War, which was signed on behalf of the U.S. by President Woodrow Wilson. The President is able to circumvent any congressional veto by turning to executive agreements which do not require the approval of Congress, or to declaratory commitments such as those made in presidential speeches, including the Monroe Doctrine of 1823, the Truman Doctrine of 1947, and the Bush Doctrine of War on Terror in 2001.

2: The Presidential Team and the Sharing of Powers

The most influential players in U.S. foreign policy-making are usually the President, the Secretary of State, the National Security Adviser to the President, the Secretary of Defence, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Director of Central Intelligence. These officials constitute the core of the National Security Council, which is the nation’s highest-level foreign policy-making body.³

The U.S. foreign policy-making team is characterized by a hierarchy in which the President and the Secretary of State occupy the two highest positions. Both are primarily responsible for “comprehensive consideration to foreign policy issues because of their unparalleled responsibilities at the apex of the U.S. foreign policy-

³ Read more; “The changing Dynamic of U.S. Foreign Policy-making”, an interview with Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Thomas R. Pickering. U.S. Foreign Policy Agenda, AN ELECTRONIC JOURNAL OF THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE, Volume 5, No 1. PP. 5-10, 2000.



making apparatus.”⁴ The role of the Minister of Defence is limited to giving an additional dimension to the discussion, (especially in light of the escalating issue of the war on terrorism on the U.S. foreign agenda). Meanwhile, the NSA “coordinates and integrates the activities and functions of all of the members of the foreign policy team. He of course intimately understands the President’s foreign policy priorities and often initiates insightful debates about that agenda during those meetings of the foreign policy principals which the President does not attend.”⁵

Theoretically, the professions within the team function quite well at face value. However, under the surface, there are many overlapping power clashes among them and many factors play significant roles in determining who gains the lion’s share of the power. In general, these factors are affected by the priorities of the president himself, the personal relationships with him, and the varying characteristics and relationships of the individuals within the team.

To illustrate the impact of such power clashes one should look at the problematic relationship between the former NSA (who then became the Secretary of State) Henry Kissinger and the former Secretary of State, William Rogers during the first term of President Richard Nixon. Despite the longstanding close personal relationship between Nixon and Rogers, it was Kissinger who played the critical role in forming U.S. foreign policy during that time, in a way that left the State Department shut out: While Foreign Secretary Rogers was in high-level contact with the Chinese in the early 1970s, in order to normalize relations with the U.S. Kissinger secretly travelled to China without informing the State Department to accomplish a deal with China which later paved the way for President Nixon’s historic visit to Beijing in February of 1972.⁶

3: The Gradual Decline of the State Department

The relationship between Kissinger and Rogers represented only the tip of the iceberg in terms of the competitive rapport between the State Department and other executive bodies. The State Department appeared to be undergoing a restructuring

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Read more, DAVID STOUT, “William P. Rogers, Who Served as Nixon's Secretary of State, Is Dead at 87”, The [New York Times](#), JAN. 4, 2001.



process during the 1980s with regard to its powers and its gradual, but continued loss of authority in favour of the White House became evident during the presidency of Bill Clinton. However, this decline in influence, which seemed slow moving, was accelerated with the arrival of George W. Bush in office and his declaration of a global war on terrorism after September 11, 2001. Accordingly, there has since been direct intervention by both the Department of Defence and security services in foreign policy.

This in turn was followed by Treasury Department intervention, particularly when the policy of imposing economic sanctions on U.S. adversaries became one of the most important tools of American foreign policy, especially against Iran and North Korea. This does not, of course, mean that the State Department has been completely marginalized, but it is no longer the first to draw-up and implement the outgoing policy in light of the intense competition it has received from its colleagues in the executive branches of U.S. government.⁷

However, with Trump in power, the process of marginalizing the State Department seems to be escalating at an astonishingly dramatic rate as illustrated by the annual budget bill submitted by the Trump administration in the second half of March 2017. It suggested a significant reduction in the State Department's budget to an estimated \$50 billion, which is less than 1% of the total GDP of the U.S.⁸ This also stands as evidence of President Trump's modest interest in professional diplomacy: As a man who has spent his entire life in the world of business, it seems he is addicted to rapid achievements and short-term tangible rewards at the expense of the less tangible benefits of diplomacy, whose outcomes take longer to materialize.⁹

Trump's marginalization of the State Department was not only limited to reductions in the proposed annual budget bill, but also to the number of its staff. Large numbers left the department in protest over Trump's victory, and many have not yet been replaced, resulting in more than 200 vacant positions at diplomatic missions around the world.

⁷ Read more; AARON DAVID MILLER and RICHARD SOKOLSKY, "Rex Tillerson Is Already Underwater", [THE GLOBAL POLITICO](#), February 22, 2017.

⁸ (7) See more; Anne Gearan, "Possible budget cuts to State Dept., foreign aid draw bipartisan opposition", [The Washington Post](#), February 28, 2017.

⁹ (8) James Goldgeier and Elizabeth N. Saunders, Good Foreign Policy Is Invisible: Why Boring Is Better", [FOREIGN AFFAIRS](#), February 28, 2017.



One department official said that in addition to the "disguised unemployment" currently affecting ministry staff, the situation is simply "no one is doing anything."¹⁰ Furthermore, the Trump administration has halted the daily press briefings by the Department of State, which had been a feature of American political life since former Secretary of State John Foster Dulles introduced them. Instead, less frequent Conferences of Department are to be held. However, the first was disappointing and widely ridiculed by the media as after more than an hour of apparent play acting by spokesman Mark Toner, fielding questions of all sorts, the journalists present were left with barely any more information than before they had arrived.¹¹

In what appears to be a further attempt to marginalize the Secretary of State and keep him away from foreign policy decision-making, President Trump vehemently rejected the names proposed by his Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson for the post of Deputy Secretary of State, which still remains vacant. While Tillerson was out of the country, the White House also abruptly removed the State Department Adviser Christie Kenny, who had served as ambassador three times and was considered the highest ranked woman in the department. Tillerson's influence is tempered by the fact that he was not Trump's first choice as Secretary of State and he is not considered one of the President's inner circle.¹²

Moreover, Tillerson was absent from President Trump's recent diplomatic meetings in Washington with international leaders such as Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (although the two men were at a working dinner the night before). It also seems that Tillerson's advice on foreign policy regarding Washington's allies and rivals was not taken into account, although some observers believe he has played a role in persuading Trump to continue pursuing the 'One-China' policy. A move which contrasts with his earlier provocation of the Chinese by threatening to open direct contact with Taiwan during his election campaign.¹³

¹⁰ (9) See more; JULIA IOFFE, "The State of Trump's State Department", [The Atlantic](#), March 1, 2017.

¹¹ (10) See more; Josh Rogin, "No news at the State Department", [Washington Post](#), March 7, 2017.

¹² (11) Anne Gearan, "Trump rejects veteran GOP foreign policy aide Elliott Abrams for State Dept. job", [The Washington Post](#), February 10, 2017.

¹³ See more; AARON DAVID MILLER and RICHARD SOKOLSKY. "Rex Tillerson Is Already Underwater". [POLITICO MAGAZINE](#). February 22, 2017.



As a result, the role of the State Department is declaring in favor of the White House and the main power centers competing for influence within it. These power centers include the conservative right-wing represented by the Tea Party Movement, whose main figure is Vice-President Mike Pence; the right-wing populists represented predominantly by Chief Strategist Stephen Bannon and Senior Presidential Policy Adviser Stephen Miller; Trump's close circle of relatives, particularly his daughter Ivanka and her husband Jared Kushner; and finally, those representing the more traditional policies of the Republican Party such as NSA Lt Gen McMaster, Defense Secretary James Mattis and Homeland Security Secretary John Kelly. The latter are very close to some Republican congressional leaders like John McCain and the conflicting interests among these power centers creates a state of chaos in terms of engineering U.S. foreign policy. This situation requires a greater understanding of the nature of the interactions within the administration so that one can anticipate the Trump's decisions Trump about foreign policy.¹⁴

4: Political Liquidity within the White House

In an article in the Washington Post, journalist and columnist Josh Rogin argues that Vice-President Pence is quietly becoming a strong foreign policy player, taking advantage of three privileges; his strong relationship to the president, his ability to build an important personal balance on some sensitive issues, and his effectiveness within the team close to President Trump.¹⁵ Moreover, Pence enjoys broad acceptance among the Republican Party's political establishment and has an extensive knowledge of the dealings within congressional corridors. He has hired some very experienced officials such as Mark Short, the White House Legislative Director (who worked with Pence in Congress), Director of the CIA Mike Pompeo, and U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Nicky Haley.

Pence's increasing role in foreign policy can be illustrated with his tour of Europe (February 2017), in which he reaffirmed American commitments to NATO and the protection of its allies, despite President Trump's demands that Europeans contribute

¹⁴ See more; JULIA IOFFE. "The State of Trump's State Department", the [Atlantic](#), March 1, 2017.

¹⁵ (15) See more; Josh Rogin, Vice President Pence is quietly becoming a foreign policy power player, [The Washington Post](#), March 5, 2017.



more to the organisation's defence budget.¹⁶ And again during the Japanese Prime Minister's visit to Washington when Trump announced that Pence and his Japanese counterpart would launch a new dialogue between the two countries on joint economic cooperation.¹⁷ Pence also played a special role in persuading President Trump to step down his NSA Michael Flynn, after it emerged he had lied about his contacts with the Russian ambassador during the election campaign. According to Brookings Institution Vice-President Bruce Jones, the appointment of Flynn to NSA deprived conservative Republicans of the centre of gravity they might need to formulate a consistent policy. However, with the absence of Flynn, Vice-President Pence now has an opportunity to occupy wider areas.

The team of Kushner, Bannon and Miller, may be regarded as stronger than others in the process of competing with the state department for power. Indeed, in the case of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, which had been at the heart of the State Department's work during previous administrations, it has now been entrusted to Kushner. In the same context, Bannon (often referred to as 'President Bannon' by the New York Times) is one of the most active players in the administration and is the driving force behind the nationalist white identity-style politics which Trump often espouses, demonstrated by his fierce antipathy towards the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and his attacks on the Black Lives Matter movement. In fact, Bannon has already begun taking on some foreign policy missions himself by joining National Security Council meetings and making personal contact with ambassadors such as the German Ambassador in Washington DC.¹⁸

On the opposite side, there is the Republican wing led by Senator John McCain which seeks to reassure the world that Trump's negative comments during his campaign on topics such as NATO, the European Union, Russia and the Middle East, do not truly reflect American foreign policy. These sentiments were made evident at the Munich Security Conference in February 2017 during Defense Secretary Mattis' speech in which he stated that there were no indications that America was seeking to 'take'

¹⁶ Josh Rogin, Pence's reassurance to Europe falls flat, [Washington Post](#), February 18, 2017.

¹⁷ Remarks by President Trump and Prime Minister Abe of Japan in Joint Press Conference, The [White House](#), February 10, 2017.

¹⁸ See more; Perry Bacon Jr., The Eight Power Centers Of The Trump Administration From the Bannon Wing to the Bureaucrats", [Five Thirty Eight](#), March 6, 2017,



Iraq's oil (as Trump had previously declared as compensation for America's costs of toppling Saddam Hussein). In his address, Senator Lindsey Graham also said that 2017 would be the year of 'political war' on Russia, and Vice-President Pence gave assurances about American commitments to NATO. These statements all seemed to tell the world; Do not worry about Trump's words. We are responsible here.

In the same context, the new NSA General McMaster insisted immediately after taking office that using the term 'radical Islamic terrorism' wasn't helpful for American goals. McMaster said jihadist terrorists aren't true to their professed religion and that the use of the phrase doesn't help U.S. attempts to work with its allies to defeat terrorist groups.¹⁹ However, Trump recently, used the same term in an address to Congress.

Conclusion

In the short term it seems that it is impossible to determine which wings of the new administration will impose its vision on foreign policy, or even the extent to which the State Department will be hindered from performing its customary professional role as the director of foreign policy. It is also unclear whether Congress will agree to such a substantial reduction in the budget of the State Department and with such a large political liquidity within Trump's administration, it remains very difficult to anticipate the outcomes. Moreover, this kind of uncertainty creates a vacuum of power that could be exploited by foreign players to enhance their influence on U.S. foreign policy. For example, the Iraqi government has already taken advantage of this situation by successfully excluding Iraqi citizens from Trump's policy of banning Muslims from entering the U.S. simply by mirroring the policy and insisting on preventing Americans from entering Iraq. Banning Americans could be a blow for the U.S. war policy on ISIS in Iraq, and could pave the way for Iran to escalate its dominance over Baghdad.

Additionally, in Mexico, the government of Enrique Peña Nieto stated that it could refuse to accept deportees without proof of their Mexican citizenship in response to Trump's promise to return all non-documented citizens. Such a move could tie up U.S. immigration courts for years and slow transfers of immigrants to a crawl. Mexico also

¹⁹ See more; Evan Perez. "National security adviser: Term 'radical Islamic terrorism' isn't helpful". [CNN](#), February 26, 2017.



speculated that it could cease cooperation in stopping the flow of Central Americans (who make up much of the current illegal alien traffic into the U.S.) across its southern border. This policy may force the Trump administration to abandon Bannon's drive for 'economic nationalism' and its assault on the NAFTA.²⁰

Generally speaking, a status of uncertainty as well as the absence of harmony in Trump's foreign policy-making process would have negative repercussions on the global order due to the U.S. prominence within it. Given the current chaotic nature of the international system, as well as regional and international instabilities, this uncertainty would push states within the system towards greater self-reliance by seeking to maximize their strengths and enhance defense capabilities in a way which could have a negative impact on international peace and security, potentially paving the way for more wars and instability.

However, despite the potential threats which this uncertainty carries, there is also opportunity for many players to advance their vital interests before a stable and clear system for the management of foreign policy is reached in the U.S., something which is expected by the end of next summer. Until then, exploiting this fluid situation, through various mechanisms, such as communicating with stakeholders within the United States administration and taking advantage of their contradictions, remains a very real possibility.⁽²¹⁾

²⁰ See more; Jackson Diehl. "How the rest of the world could shape Trump's foreign policy", [The Washington Post](#), March 5, 2017.

⁽²¹⁾ The views are expressing on their authors, not necessarily reflect the Egyptian Institute