

America (still) first? – assessment of the first year of Donald Trump's presidency

Donald Trump's victory in the US presidential election was met with major reservations and a sense of apprehension coming from the experts and commentators alike, predominantly due to his lack of political prowess and experience. Trump's views and blunt statements regarding both domestic and international affairs (such as his criticism of NATO, announcements of a possible withdrawal from multilateral trade agreements, or building a wall along the US-Mexico border) delivered in the course of his campaign, as well as murky business ties of his immediate co-workers was a cause for concern both internationally, and in the US itself. As of now, however, Trump's tenure – in spite of a number of spectacular decisions, such as the recognition of Jerusalem as a capital of Israel, or bombardment of Syrian Air Force base – has not yielded a drastic change of course in internal and foreign policies of the US, nor significantly diverged from positions held by the mainstream of the Republican Party. The constitutional system of checks and balances has also proven its efficacy, either blocking or restricting some of the more controversial decisions of the new Administration.

The Trump administration is struggling to come through with many of the promises made in the course of the campaign, such as repealing the Obama Care, or immigration system reform. The tax reform, another flagship project of the campaign did come to fruition however, and is one of the major accomplishments of the current administration in the White House

Domestic politics – shadow of Kremlin and prestigious defeats

The hacking scandal that took place during the presidential race has cast a shadow over the first year of Trump's tenure. The security breach resulted in leaking of thousands of Hillary Clinton campaign staff emails, compromising her campaign in the process. Russia was

accused of not only perpetrating the attack, but also meddling in the 2016 campaign. In retaliation, the outgoing Obama administration expelled 35 Russian diplomatic staff.

Consequently, Obama administration ordered US intelligence agencies (CIA, FBI, NSA) to investigate. The product of those investigations was a background report, entitled *Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent US Elections*ⁱ: *The Analytic Process and Cyber Incident Attribution*. The report concluded, that Russia orchestrated a campaign aimed at not only undermining the trust in the electoral system, but also influencing the outcome of the 2016 elections – even though the extent to which those actions were effective remains unclear. The outgoing Administration has also stated, that the highest authorities of the Russian Federation could be implicated in the data theft and its subsequent disclosureⁱ. The FBI investigation, supervised by the Special Prosecutor Robert Muellerⁱⁱ, and the probes of the House and Senate Intelligence Committeesⁱⁱⁱ are still ongoing. This is inconvenient for Trump, because it was his campaign that was the main beneficiary of the hacking scandal. That in turn paved the way for a series of accusations being levelled against him, implying that the attacks against the Democratic Party might have been coordinated by the Russians, especially since a number of key personnel of the Trump campaign had unclear ties with the Kremlin's ruling elite. Chairman of his campaign, Paul Manafort had served as an advisor to the former Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich prior to his work with Trump and had business ties with people closely associated with the Kremlin. In a similar fashion, the Head of National Security Council (a principal advisory forum tasked with coordinating US security policies) Gen. Michael Flynn was paid to attend a number of conferences in Russia, where he appeared in the company of Vladimir Putin himself. To make matters worse, Flynn met with the Russian ambassador to Washington, Sergey Kislyak during the campaign, failing to inform vice-President Pence about those encounters.

In light of these developments, Trump dismissed Flynn in February 2017 (in December of the same year Flynn pleaded guilty to a single count of lying to the FBI regarding his meeting with a member of the Russian diplomatic staff^{iv} – Paul Manafort. Rick Gates and George Papadopoulos are also being charged^v). Likewise, Attorney General Jeff Sessions has met with Sergey Kislyak, what ultimately led to the AG recusing himself from the investigation of Russian interference in the election.

Donald Trump's immediate family was also embroiled in controversy, including his son Donald Jr., son-in-law Jared Kushner and the already mentioned Paul Manafort, all of whom

have met with a Russian lawyer Natalya Veselnitskaya, who was alleged to have provided them with materials compromising Clinton campaign (Trump Jr. stated that no such materials were ever delivered). The FBI and Congressional investigations left a deep mark on the first year of Trump's presidency. A significant portion of the White House activity throughout that period was focused on rebuking accusations leveraged against Trump by the media. Trump himself claims, that despite the US intelligence agencies stating otherwise, there is no proof of Russian interference in the 2016 elections, and calls the entire affair a "Democratic witch hunt"^{vi}. Furthermore he is alleged to have exerted pressure on the then FBI director James Comey to drop the Flynn investigation (which is denied by the White House)^{vi}.

The Trump administration has also faced serious adversity in pushing its flagship policies, announced in the course of the campaign. Trump is still unable to repeal the single payer healthcare, commonly referred to as the Obama Care. Notwithstanding, the tax reform bill adopted in December 2017 (formally known as *Tax cuts and Jobs Act*) removed the individual mandate of the Obamacare (Trump also undertook a series of administrative decisions aimed at undercutting the Obama bill)^{viii}. Trump has also failed to reform the immigration system. The DACA Act, adopted by the Obama Administration, which served to prevent deportation of individuals who entered the US illegally as minors (and thus did not knowingly commit a crime by crossing the US border illegally) is one glaring example of his failure in this regard. Trump abolished DACA, but has still not managed to resolve the issue of over 750.000 "dreamers". In his negotiations with the Democratic Party (whose consent is necessary to adopt the federal budget) Trump has demanded that any new program of this kind must contain provisions for reserving funds for building the wall along the Mexico border, and abolish the Diversity Visa Lottery^x. One of the flagship projects that Trump did successfully implement was the tax reform, which reduces corporate income tax from 35 to 21 percent, and alters ranges of seven applicable tax brackets^x.

The Trump Administration is also haunted by a series of high profile resignations and staffing problems. Apart from Flynn, other ranking members have also vacated their positions, including Steve Bannon (who first replaced Manafort as chief strategist, and then was one of Trump's key advisors) and Sebastian Gorka, both of which were associated with the controversial right wing movement known as the alt-right. Those changes could, however, be viewed positively, as seasoned government officials including Secretary of

Defense Jim Mattis or Gen. Herbert McMaster are now able to exert a greater deal of influence in shaping the US defence and foreign policy.

Foreign Policy – without (major) surprises

As far as foreign policy is concerned, the new Administration quickly began implementing some of Trump's controversial postulates dating back to the election campaign. Almost immediately after the new President was sworn in, the United States withdrew from negotiations regarding the Trans-Pacific Partnership, a multilateral trade agreement involving states in the Pacific region, which was meant to balance China's growing influence in the region (the Partnership was an important element of the pivot towards Asia Pacific policy of the Obama Administration). Negotiations regarding the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (abbreviated TTIP) were also suspended, however the US stopped short of scrapping the proposed agreement altogether^{xi}.

In June 2017 the new US Administration announced its intend to withdraw from the 2015 Paris Agreement on Climate Change (which set the goal of halting the average global rise in temperature to below 2 degrees Celsius above to the pre-industrial era level). Trump justified this action by the negative impact the agreement would have on the US economy. Nevertheless, the US can only withdraw from the Paris Agreement after 4 years since its entry into force, in 2020 (US formally notified its intent to withdraw in August 2017) – after the end of Trump's tenure. The current Administration has also signalled, that it could return to the agreement, if its conditions are altered in order to be more accommodating of the US economy^{xii}.

Europe and Russia

Despite the criticism of NATO during his campaign, Trump and key members of his cabinet have repeatedly underscored the commitment of the US to the provisions of the Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty (first time Trump himself has publicly reaffirmed the US commitment to the mutual defence principle during a meeting with Romanian President Klaus Iohannis in June 2017^{xiii}). The new administration has also upheld the European Reassurance Initiative – primary program supporting the US allies threatened by an increased assertiveness of the Russian Federation (in the budget proposal for the fiscal year

2018 the ERI funding has been increased to \$4.8 billion) and the European Phased Adaptive Approach – key component of the US contribution to the NATO Ballistic Missile Defence (two Aegis Ashore bases are currently under construction as a part of this project, in Poland's Redzikowo, and Romanian city of Deveselu).

The US policy towards Russia has also not been subjected to significant alterations. The sanctions regime established in the aftermath of the Russian annexation of Crimea, and on the basis of the 2012 Magnitsky Act are still in force. Additionally, in August 2017 the US Congress has levied new set of sanctions against individuals and companies investing in the Russian energy market^{xiv} (*Countering America's Adversaries through Sanctions Act*) due to, among others, the Russian meddling in the US Elections. In retaliation, Russia has expelled 755 US Diplomats and ordered closing of two facilities belonging to the US Government^{xv}. At the present time relations between the US and Russia remain poor, evidenced by the fact that the presidents of these two states have only met once so far – during the G-20 Summit in Hamburg^{xvi} (complemented by a short conversation held during the APEC Summit in Vietnam).

Asia

The US policy towards Asia has not been drastically changed either, despite the fact that the current administration does not prioritise the region to the same extent that the previous one did (Obama era pivot/rebalancing). Following the withdrawal from TTIP talks, the US Administration aims at establishing a more beneficial bilateral trade agreements and decreasing the trade deficits with the states in that region. Trump's 12 day visit to Asia (including Japan, South Korea, China, Vietnam and the Philippines) was meant to serve that purpose^{xvii}.

The US policy towards Asia during the first year of Trump's tenure has been defined by the North Korean Nuclear Program, which has resulted in a single nuclear test in the past year (the North Korean government has stated that it conducted a hydrogen bomb test), and over a dozen of ballistic missile tests. Even worse for the US, the North Korean regime has acquired the ability to field intercontinental ballistic missiles (Hwasong-14 and Hwasong-15), that theoretically have the capacity to strike the mainland United States. In the wake of those developments Washington is adhering to its policy of strict isolation of the DPRK and pressuring other states to follow suit. Accompanying these diplomatic efforts are Trump's

very strong statements delivered via the social media directed at the Pyongyang regime, including the famous fire and brimstone tweet. On the other hand, the US administration has declared its willingness to engage in negotiations with the North Korea, if it would be willing to abandon its nuclear ambitions.

The Middle East

US policies in the Middle East were affected to the greatest extent. Very early into his tenure Trump ordered a cruise missile strike on Syrian Air Force base in retaliation for the Khan Sheikhoun chemical attack perpetrated by the Syrian Arab Army (the Obama administration stopped short of such action). This has not resulted, however, in a larger US involvement in Syria, even though the US, Russia and Jordan did broker an armistice in South-Western Syria (according to a DoD statement dated October 2017, the cease-fire is holding)^{xviii}. Trump has also unveiled a new US strategy in Afghanistan, one that categorically ruled out a complete withdrawal of US from the country and announced his intent to continue with the training programmes and counter terrorist missions, based on a clearly defined set of goals^{xix}.

The Trump administration has been very critical of Iran. The new president is clearly disapproving of the Iran nuclear deal (formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, JCPA), which was signed in 2015 by Iran and the P5+1 countries (five permanent members of the UN Security Council and Germany). The Agreement assumes a gradual decrease of enriched uranium stockpiles and the number of centrifuges in return for easing and removing sanctions previously imposed on Iran. The current administration is of the opinion, however, that the agreement does not apply to the Iranian ballistic missile program, and therefore needs to be renegotiated (other parties of the JCPA are sceptical of this notion).

One of the most spectacular moves of Trump administration is recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, and a simultaneous relocation of the US embassy from Tel-Aviv to Jerusalem – much to the outrage of Arab world. Nevertheless, the White House argues that this decision is merely an acknowledgement of a factual situation, and does not assume the extent of Israel's sovereignty over Jerusalem and its geographical borders. Conversely, Washington is of the belief, that this decision will positively affect the Israeli-Palestinian conflict resolution^{xx}.

Conclusions:

1. At the present the Trump presidency, despite several spectacular decisions, has not resulted in a dramatic reshuffling of the domestic or foreign policy of the United States, and has not deviated from the mainstream positions of the Republican Party. The system of checks and balances has prevented the implementation of some of the more controversial proposals of the current administration, thus proving its efficiency.
2. The first year of Trump's tenure was heavily affected by the hacking scandal dating back to the campaign period, and to the breach of Democratic National Committee, resulting in a publication of e-mails compromising the Democratic Party and Hillary Clinton. Currently, the scandal is being investigated by the FBI and, among others, House and Senate Intelligence Committees.
3. The Trump administration is struggling to come through with many of the promises made in the course of the campaign, such as repealing the Obama Care, or immigration system reform. The tax reform, another flagship project of the campaign did come to fruition however, and is one of the major accomplishments of the current administration in the White House.
4. Despite his unrelenting criticism of NATO during the campaign, both Trump himself, and his key cabinet members have repeatedly reaffirmed the principles of the Article 5 of the NATO Charter. In a similar fashion the European Reassurance Initiative, a main mean of providing support for the European states threatened by Russia's growing assertiveness has been kept.
5. The US policy towards Russia has not changed. Sanctions previously imposed on Russia are maintained. What's more, in August 2017, the Congress imposed a new set of sanctions on Russia for, among others, Russian interference in the US elections.
6. American policy towards Asia has not been altered fundamentally, although the new Administration does not emphasise the importance of the region in the same way that the Obama administration did (pivot / rebalancing). On the other hand, the changes did affect the American policy in the Near and Middle East (calling the so-called nuclear deal into question, presenting a new strategy on Afghanistan, and the recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel).

Author: Tomasz Smura, Head of the Research Office at the Casimir Pulaski Foundation

Translation: Albert Świdziński, Analyst, Research Office

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