

Donald Trump and America's Grand Strategy: U.S. foreign policy toward Europe, Russia and China

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Abstract

The Trump administration continues to be an administration in transition. It has taken the new President and his entourage a prolonged period of time to settle in. The new administration has not yet managed to formulate something approximating a comprehensive U.S. foreign policy and a "grand strategy" for establishing a new global order. However, preceding administrations have also found this difficult and almost impossible to achieve. The Trump White House is divided between an ideological wing and a more pragmatic faction with the President unable to decide which faction to side with. Secretary of State Tillerson has made clear that Trump's "America First" foreign policy is all about U.S. national security and prosperity. The Trump administration, it seems, has very little inclination to base U.S. foreign policy on the country's traditional democratic and humanitarian values.

This article also considers U.S. foreign policy toward Europe, Russia/the Middle East and China. It concludes that compared to the shrill rhetoric of the election campaign, the administration has begun to pursue a more moderate foreign policy. The White House has come out in support of NATO, there is even talk about a revival of the TTIP negotiations, there has been a new relatively harmonious relationship with China and the administration attempts to pursue a constructive policy of re-engagement with Russia regarding Syria and Ukraine. The notion of a "normalization" of the Trump administration's foreign policy should not be taken too far, however. A predilection for constant change, turmoil and self-promotion is the one enduring and reliable factor that characterizes the administration and the President himself.

Policy recommendations

- Trump needs to side with the pragmatic faction among his foreign policy advisers.
- America's traditional values ought to be the basis for US foreign policy rather than the achievement of narrow national security and economic objectives independent of these values.
- The rapprochement with China ought to be continued but should not lead to the marginalization of uncomfortable issues such as human rights, climate change and the South China Sea dispute. The rapprochement with China should include a new initiative for multi-party talks with North Korea.
- As a matter of urgency, and similar to the belated support for NATO, the Trump administration should begin to strongly support the European integration process.
- A constructive re-engagement with Russia ought to occur on the basis of finding a solution for the Syrian civil war and the Ukrainian conflict. Sanction should only be lifted when real concrete results have been achieved.

Trump's foreign policy principles

The Trump administration continues to be an administration in transition. It has taken the new President and his entourage a prolonged period of time to settle in. This process is still continuing. While a number of foreign policy priorities have emerged, the picture is far from complete. No wonder. More than 200 senior policy jobs in the State Department that require Senate confirmation still have not been filled by the President. Neither has the new administration managed to get round to formulating something approximating a coherent foreign policy strategy. In fact, amidst all the chaos of Trump's presidential executive orders, political uncertainty, the Russia investigation crisis, and the shrill rhetoric that has engulfed the US capital since his inauguration, the new administration has hardly had the time or inclination to begin thinking about the formulation of a "grand strategy."

As former State Department official Richard Burt notes somewhat euphemistically, the Trump administration's "[world view](#)" and "[sense of direction](#)" remain "[undefined](#)." In fact, there have only been a few clear (and controversial) decisions such as the withdrawal from the TPP and the submission of a request to Congress for an increase in defense spending by almost 10 per cent. On the whole both the geo-economic and the geo-political dimensions of Trump's foreign policy strategy are vague and often contradictory. Not much of a "grand

strategy" for establishing a new global order can be detected so far (Haass, 2017).

Trump is in good company here, however. A "grand strategy" for US post-Cold War foreign policy also eluded all U.S. administrations from George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton to George W. Bush and Barack Obama (Hooker, 2014; Martel, 2015). A successor to George Kennan's somewhat overrated "strategy of containment" of the distant Cold War years is not in sight and may never be found (Anderson, 2017, 32ff; Gaddis, 2011). In an increasingly complex, unpredictable and multilateral world the search for a comprehensive "new global order" is unlikely to succeed. The idea of thinking in terms of a "[G2" world with China](#), for instance, as first proposed by former National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski holds [little attraction for Washington](#) (and China does not like the idea either).

In any case embarking on deep strategic thinking is not in vogue in the Trump White House. Instead, reacting to day-to-day events and making foreign policy based on gut instinct and personal sympathies has become the dominant paradigm. It appears, however, that in a number of crucial areas the White House has begun to pursue a policy of major U-turns. In the process Trump's foreign policy has become orientated along [more traditional U.S. foreign policy lines](#). Still, the notion of a "normalization" of the Trump administration's foreign policy should not be taken too far. The jury is still out. After all, a

predilection for constant change, turmoil and self-promotion is the one enduring and reliable factor that characterizes the administration and the President himself. And this state of affairs reflects a deeper split within the Trump White House.

A battle is being waged between the ideological Steve Bannon faction and a more pragmatic faction. The former wishes to bring down the modern bureaucratic (or administrative) state and go back to the America of Andrew Jackson and the supremacy of the white “common man.” The more pragmatic faction sees itself in the tradition of the conservative Reagan administration when the U.S. was the undisputed global leader. As Andrew Sullivan argues persuasively, Bannon and company have a “passionate loathing of the status quo” and a strong desire to return to America’s golden self-contained past “in one emotionally cathartic revolt” (Sullivan, 2017). This applies to domestic but also to foreign affairs. The other more pragmatic faction is no less hardline but attempts to push the administration toward a more engaged and cooperative foreign policy that is, however, still based on rather nationalistic “America First” sentiments. The President is frequently uncertain where to position himself and plays it by ear allowing himself to be influenced by the situation at hand, his personal prejudices and preferences as well as the personalities he happens to encounter at any given time. At present, it seems, in foreign affairs

Trump has begun to lean toward the ‘pragmatic’ faction but there is no guarantee that this will become a more permanent feature of his administration.

Trump and the re-emergence of reality

Many of the assertive and aggressive foreign policy statements made by Trump and his entourage during the election campaign, the transition phase and the first few months in office have been reversed in the meantime. Relations with China, NATO and Russia come to mind above all. Since the Florida summit with the Chinese president in early April 2017 Trump’s condemnation of China has given way to a new precarious harmony between Washington and Beijing. Trump’s skepticism about the continuing existence of NATO has been replaced by renewed US support for the alliance. And his admiration of the Russian president has given way to criticism of Russia’s international behavior in Syria, Ukraine and elsewhere. How can the reversal of once very strongly held foreign policy positions be explained?

To some extent it is obvious what has happened: reality has interfered and intruded on the lofty hardline nationalistic thinking that dominated the administration during the first few months. This in turn has been influenced by the changing role of a number of important presidential advisers. The administration, after all, is also still in transition regarding the

personalities that shape the Trump era. With the exception of the “[Decisive Three](#)” - the President himself and his two closest advisers who happen to be married to each other and are drawn from his immediate family - a closely knit network of Trump policy makers is only very gradually emerging.

Right-wing ideologues and inflexible economic nationalists such as Steve Bannon, Steve Miller, Sebastian Gorka, Kellyanne Conway, Peter Navarro and Kathleen McFarland have been somewhat sidelined but most of them remain in Trump’s inner circle. Lately, however, more competent experts with a greater grasp on reality such as National Economic Council chairman Gary Kohn, a former Goldman Sachs banker, but also Secretary of State Tillerson have seen their influence grow. Not least the advice given by defense experts such as General H.R. McMaster, the National Security Adviser, and Secretary of Defense General James Mattis are being taken more seriously by the White House [than was the case initially](#).

Yet, this situation is in flux and there is no guarantee that the “grown-ups” in the administration will continue to increase their influence. While McMaster, for instance, is credited with having “professionalized” the National Security Council, Trump appears to have become “disillusioned” with him. He has complained that his policy is being undermined and the President has openly clashed with the formidable General several times. McMaster’s

attempt to appoint Brigadier General Rick Waddell as his Deputy was [blocked by the White House](#). For the time being McMaster remains in office; this ensures that a dose of reality continues to influence US foreign policy.

Paradoxically this has led to the fact that many of the foreign policy objectives of the Obama administration continue to be pursued by the Trump government. Still, while the Obama White House was proud of coming across as a [reliable, trustworthy and predictable government](#), Trump aspires to the opposite. He is mightily proud of his “flexibility” which, he believes, enables him to change course quickly whenever it seems [appropriate to him. “We must, as a nation, be more unpredictable,”](#) he declared in April 2016 during a major campaign speech. However, to many observes at home and abroad, this unpredictability comes close to incoherence and confusion as the [Washington Post has argued](#).

The unusual working habits of the new administration and the President himself have contributed to this impression. Cautious long-term strategic planning has given way to a much more hasty, emotional and greatly disorganized way of conducting America’s foreign policy. A transition has occurred from a President who needed three months to make up his mind to an incumbent who decides on a new course of action [impulsively and within a short period of an event having occurred](#). A good point in time is the US air strike on the Syrian Shayrat airbase on

April 6, 2017, from which Assad's air force had launched the chemical weapons' attack on civilians. Within a few hours and shortly before Trump sat down for dinner with the visiting Chinese leader, the President and his national security team [decided to attack Assad's airbase with the help of 57 powerful cruise missiles.](#)

Nevertheless, the strongly anti-western, anti-establishment and anti-global objectives that Trump formulated as recently as a couple of months ago have all but disappeared. Trump has evolved from an apostle of a semi-isolationist "America First" policy to a leader who has become much more internationally engaged than he ever desired or anticipated. Similar to his predecessor, Trump has also developed a taste for high-level personal summit diplomacy of well-publicized and much hyped events with foreign leaders. He clearly relishes the global attention.

Still, anything which could be termed a US "grand security strategy" in the Trump years has not evolved and there are no indications that the development of such a comprehensive strategy can be expected any time soon. In fact with the exception of some Twitter messages and a number of bland statements when meeting foreign dignitaries, since the inauguration Trump has made no detailed statements on the main tenets and objectives of his [overall foreign policy.](#)

Tillerson's "America First" Foreign Policy

It was left to Rex Tillerson, the former Exxon Mobile chairman turned Secretary of State, to espouse some of the principles of Trump's foreign policy. On May 3, 2017 he [addressed the employees of the State Department](#) in Washington, DC. The Secretary explained that it was his intention to share his "perspective as to how does this administration's policies of 'America First' fit into our foreign policy and foreign affairs." Tillerson outlined that the frozen and contained history of the Cold War years was still shaping international affairs. Although "history [has] regained its march" and the "old conflicts have renewed themselves" and made the world "a whole lot more complicated," U.S. diplomacy has not yet adapted to the new situation, he said. ["We've not yet transitioned ourselves to this new reality."](#)

In his rambling speech Tillerson outlined that "America First" merely referred to a greater focus on US national security and economic prosperity; it didn't follow that this would come "at the expense of others." "Our partnerships and our alliances are critical to our success in both of those areas," he outlined. But the U.S. had "lost track of how we were doing," and some of the relationships "got a little bit out of balance" and now needed to be brought "back into balance." This, Tillerson, explained was what Trump meant. On the whole this didn't sound too bad and many of his listeners may have been relieved by the statement.

Yet, Tillerson proceeded to talk about the challenge of advancing America's national security and economic interests while also representing the country's values which he defined as "freedom, human dignity, the way people are treated." He pronounced that "in some circumstances" it was clear "if you condition our national security efforts on someone adopting our values, we probably can't achieve our national security goals or our national security interest." In the next sentence Tillerson made it even clearer: "If we condition too heavily that others must adopt this (sic!) value, it really creates obstacles to our ability to advance our national security interests, our economic interests." Realizing that he had just dismissed human rights as a factor for America's foreign policy, Tillerson quickly qualified his sobering remark. "In some circumstances, we should and do condition our policy engagements on people adopting certain actions as to how they treat people," he said. Nevertheless, he continued, "that doesn't mean that's the case in every situation. And so we really have to understand, in each country or each region of the world that we're dealing with, what are our national security interests, what are our economic prosperity interests ..."

Tillerson had expressed himself unambiguously: the Trump administration, being largely run by hard-nosed businessmen, has decided to take a leaf out of China's and Russia's book for its "grand strategy." Values and human

rights don't matter much as long as the country can push through its security and economic interests.

A look at US foreign policy toward Europe, Russia/the Middle East and Asia may help to tease out some of the Trump administration's foreign policy priorities in a number of crucial areas.

Europe, NATO, and Transatlantic Relations:

Trump's skepticism and lack of understanding of the process of European integration has not changed. He referred to the British decision to leave the EU as "fantastic." There has been no indication that he understands or is even aware of the fact that peace, stability and prosperity on the continent have been based to a large extent on the European integration process. In particular this was the case in the first few decades after the end of World War II (Loth, 2015). Instead in the early months of 2017 Trump did not hesitate to come out in support of French presidential candidate Marine Le Pen who had made no secret of her ambition for France to leave the EU. If she had won the French presidential elections in April/May 2017, the future existence of the EU would have been very much in doubt.

Trump has a very traditional understanding of the role of sovereign nation states. Essentially it is based on the concept of the concert of nations that dominated

international politics in the 19th and first half of the 20th century. Trump would have no difficulty to agree with the real-political sentiments expressed by British Prime Minister Palmerston somewhat simplistically in 1848. His country, Palmerston pronounced, had “no eternal allies” or enemies. Britain’s “interests are eternal and perpetual, and those interests it is our duty to follow” (Heath, 1969).

This belief in a narrowly defined national interest also explains Trump’s skepticism toward NATO which he repeatedly expressed during the election campaign. [He referred to NATO as “obsolete.” In the meantime, however, he has reversed his view.](#) Visitors such as German Chancellor Merkel and other European leaders as well as the impact of the advice of McMasters and Mattis and some Members of Congress, such as John McCain, have enlightened him about the benefits of NATO for the U.S. After all, NATO is the only institutional link that formally binds the U.S. to its allies in Europe (Kaplan, 1999). In particular NATO’s role in fighting international terrorist organizations such as ISIS and Al Qaida have impressed Trump. Initially he was entirely unaware that NATO has taken an active anti-terrorist role since as early as the immediate aftermath of 9/11.

The U.S. President continues to be upset, however, that the European allies are not paying their way in defense matters. Most of them except a handful of states are not achieving the self-imposed goal to dedicate at least two per

cent of GDP to their national defense effort. The Germans, for instance, contribute hardly more than 1.2 per cent to defense. When Chancellor Merkel visited the White House in March 2017 Trump reportedly handed her [a fake invoice for over 300 billion dollars](#), the amount, according to the calculation of the White House, the Germans had not spent on defense since the late 1990s. [Merkel was not impressed](#) (also Larres, 2014).

The Trump administration has put great pressure on its NATO allies and asked them “to really meet their obligations” and make sure that these [“aspirational obligations” become very concrete.”](#) Most countries, including Germany, have promised to increase their defense efforts. Washington, after all, is leading by example. In its first budget proposal to Congress the Trump administration has included an almost 10 per cent increase in U.S. defense spending by \$54 billion (this increase is almost as much as Russia’s entire defense budget). Most of the new money, if granted, is meant to be spent on the U.S. navy, with a heavy proportion benefitting U.S. engagement in the Pacific, thus turning Obama’s ‘pivot to Asia’ into reality (Campbell, 2016).

No clear word has come out of the White House whether or not the negotiations of a *Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership* (TTIP) will be continued between the US and the EU. In trade matters the EU represents all 28 member countries. The individual EU countries are not entitled to negotiate bilateral trade deals with third countries, including the US. [Trump](#)

[suggested a bilateral German-US trade deal several times during Chancellor Merkel's visit to the White House in March](#) and did not quite understand that she was neither willing nor entitled to embark on this course of action which would clearly drive a wedge among the EU countries.

A number of rumors and cautious hints at the margins of the spring meeting of the International Monetary Fund in Washington in April 2017 indicated that the Trump administration [may have second thoughts about giving up on the TTIP negotiations](#) that have continued for the last three years. They are currently on halt but they have not been formally terminated. Reportedly Angela Merkel told Trump during her visit that negotiating [a good and fair transatlantic trade deal would be much simpler than he may think.](#)

Thus, after initial tension and disagreements transatlantic relations during the Trump era remain difficult but they are clearly on the mend. The new administration in Washington has realized that America's European allies are one of the strongest assets the U.S. has. This compares well with the paucity of genuine allies that Russia and China have.

Russia and the Syrian War

[Trump's "gushing admiration" for strong authoritarian leaders](#) with a penchant for

dominating their countries and staying in power for a prolonged period of time are well known. Throughout the election campaign and first couple of months of his presidency he expressed his great sympathy for Russian President Putin and was careful not to criticize him publicly. There were rumors that Trump was even ready to lift the [severe US sanctions on Russia](#) that had been imposed when Moscow annexed Crimea in March 2014. Yet, by late March/early April with the increasing pace of at least five investigations by a number of congressional committees and the FBI into Russia's attempt in the summer and fall of 2016 to influence the American presidential election the White House became rather concerned. Not least the question whether or not there had been illegal contacts between Trump campaign members (and perhaps even Trump himself) and Putin's entourage was deeply troubling. Trump's first [National Security Adviser Michael Flynn had to resign](#) in February after less than 30 days in the job for deceiving Vice President Pence about the substance of his talks with Russian officials (it included the possible lifting of sanctions) that contradicted the policy of the outgoing Obama administration.

In order to put some distance between the White House and the Kremlin Trump began toning down his publicly expressed admiration of Putin. Instead he and some of his ministers such as UN ambassador Nikki Haley, started criticizing Russian policy in Syria and Ukraine. The highpoint of Trump's estrangement with Putin came when

the US challenged Russia for having tolerated Syrian president Assad's attack on innocent civilians with chemical weapons on April 4, 2017. Contrary to the persuasive results of a number of international investigations, Moscow attempted to blame the anti-Assad rebel groups for the attack though at times it also claimed that mistakenly a [warehouse with chemicals had been hit](#). Prior to Tillerson's journey to Moscow in mid-April during which he met both Foreign Minister Lavrov and Putin himself, the Kremlin announced gloomily that ["relations with the United States had reached their lowest point since the Cold War."](#)

Soon afterwards, however, Trump spoke about the necessity to engage with Putin and perhaps meet with him in the near future. On May 2 the President had a ["good" phone conversation](#) with the Russian president that dealt above all with the war in Syria. The day after Secretary of State Tillerson also [referred to a "re-engagement with Russia" as a priority of US foreign policy](#). A working group was set up under the Acting Deputy Secretary of State to start stabilizing relations and tackle disagreements with Russia in the fields of conventional and nuclear arms agreements and Ukraine. [Trump's firing of the FBI director in bizarre circumstances on 9 May](#) turned the dubious role Russia played in the US election campaign once again into the talk of the town. The President, however, did not hesitate to receive Russian foreign minister Lavrov and ambassador Kislyak in the Oval Office

the day after. [Bizarrely Trump insisted on excluding the American media from the meeting](#). [The resulting pictures were from a Russian TASS news agency correspondent who had gained admittance](#). The Trump administration hopes that a deal with Russia to end the civil war in Syria can be reached. A U.S. representative, along with UN negotiator Staffan de Mistura, also attended the meeting in Astana, Kazakhstan, that dealt with the conflict and agreed tentatively on [organizing four safe zones](#) for civilians in Syria. The meeting was organized by Russia, Iran and Turkey.

Washington clearly believes that an agreement on Syria could subsequently be used as a stepping stone for a new more trusting relationship with the Kremlin in general. But Trump is also convinced that the U.S. must become much more involved in the fight against ISAS and Al Qaida. Following up on his campaign promises and ignoring Turkey's strong objections, the administration has decided [to arm the Syrian Kurds](#) in their fight against the remnants of ISIS in Syria and Iraq. Trump's military advisers have also [proposed the deployment of 3000 additional US troops](#) to Afghanistan to break the military stalemate in the country.

The aim of the Trump administration to reach a policy of constructive engagement and rapprochement with Moscow is a sound one in principle, given the right conditions and circumstances. However, it is not clear whether the administration in fact has developed a

carefully worked-out strategy of how to deal with Russia, Syria and ISIS. We may find out sooner rather than later. Trump and Putin will meet at the G20 summit in Hamburg in July and a bilateral summit between Putin and Trump may also occur soon.

Still, relations with Russia are unlikely to be “normalized” before the investigations [“to understand whether there was any coordination between the Russian efforts and anybody associated with the Trump campaign”](#) have been satisfactorily resolved. Trump’s unexpected firing of FBI Director Comey on May 9 has focused even more attention on the issue than hitherto. Comey, after all, had asked the Justice Department for additional resources and personnel for the FBI investigation [just a few days before he was fired](#). The renewed crisis about the ‘Russia factor’ and whether or not [Trump has business dealings with Russia and is in ‘Putin’s pocket’](#) seems to have rattled the President. [He asked his lawyers to release a letter that outlined the allegedly very limited business connections Trump has had with Russian entrepreneurs. This letter, however, seems to be full of holes.](#)

China and North Korea

There is very little left of Trump’s aggressive verbal attacks on China during the election campaign. The turning point came during the phone conversation with Xi Jinping, the Chinese president, on February 9. Already prior to this call

Trump had agreed to Beijing’s request not to question the ‘One-China policy’ as he appeared to have done when he accepted a congratulatory phone call from Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen in early December. This was the first time since 1978 that a U.S. President had had direct contact with his Taiwanese counterpart. China interpreted it as a challenge to one of its core national interests. During the phone call with Xi in early February, however, Trump confirmed Washington’s [adherence to the ‘One-China policy’](#). This provided the basis for an improvement in US-Chinese relations.

Two months later, during the bilateral meeting with Xi Jinping at Trump’s Mar-a-Lago estate in Florida on April 6-7, 2017, [relations were stabilized further](#). In particular, the Florida talks dealt with trade and Trump’s interest in reducing his country’s huge trade deficit with China. The discussions do not seem to have focused on climate change, human rights or the South-China Sea dispute. Instead, Trump and Xi agreed on a 100-day plan for trade talks to increase US exports to China, which would help chip away at the country’s \$347 billion trade deficit. Xi even claimed that he welcomed such a development as reducing the Chinese trade surplus would allow Beijing to better control its own inflation.

To avert a trade war with the US, Xi suggested rescinding the 2003 ban on US beef exports to China. He also talked about better market access for American financial

investments, particularly securities and insurance. But Xi also indicated that the US trade deficit could be significantly reduced if Chinese companies were allowed to make major investments in the U.S. and purchase high-tech companies. Beijing hopes that in the future the U.S. will impose fewer restrictions on the purchase of US high-tech products and firms, such as Aixtron whose purchase by a Chinese company the US blocked in 2016. Yet, this is optimistic as the U.S. has serious security concerns about allowing China to purchase crucial knowledge industries which are often [of military importance](#).

Still, the ‘new harmony’ in US-China relations bore fruit when on 12 May [a 10-point trade deal was announced with great fanfare by the Trump administration](#). China has agreed to allow US credit rating agencies and credit card companies to commence business in China from mid-July and will also resume U.S. beef imports. Washington will start exporting liquid natural gas to China and accept imports of cooked poultry meat from Beijing. Still, China has a history of making economic and financial promises without then adhering to them. Moreover, the overcapacity of steel production in China, concerns about the new Chinese cyber security law due to come into effect in June, and continuing barriers (and theft of intellectual property) to economic activities by western companies in China have not been addressed in the new trade deal. Nevertheless, the trade deal demonstrates a continuing improvement of US-

Chinese relations. In an interview with [The Economist](#) Trump confirmed that he liked Xi Jinping “a lot” and that he thought that “he likes me a lot.” The President expressed his view that Xi was “a great guy.”

During the Florida meeting in early April Trump also accepted Xi’s invitation to visit China in the foreseeable future. The two leaders agreed to establish a “U.S.-China Comprehensive Dialogue” consisting of four strands (diplomacy and security, economy, law enforcement and cyber security). This new dialogue replaces and upgrades Obama’s “Strategic and Economic Dialogue.” It will take place at presidential level and is not altogether dissimilar to the annual high-level [German-Chinese Government Consultations](#).

Another major topic at the Florida meeting was North Korea. Both Presidents agreed that North Korea’s nuclear development has “reached a very serious stage,” though they part ways on how to deal with it. During the talks, Trump repeated that Washington is prepared to take unilateral action if China does not pressure North Korea into a change of policy. This could include a (potentially very dangerous) military strike on North Korea or perhaps the re-introduction of nuclear weapons in South Korea. [According to Tillerson](#) not only the U.S. but also China are in favor of a de-nuclearized Korean peninsula.

This is doubtful, however. China is fully aware of the fact that for North Korea the atomic bomb is an insurance policy for the survival of the regime. Pyongyang and its young leader Kim-Jong-un are therefore hardly willing to agree to the denuclearization of North Korea. Any US and international promises not to invade or otherwise undermine his hold on power and help North Korea economically in return for denuclearizing his country count for little in Kim's eyes. Kim Jong-un, after all, is well aware of the fate of Saddam Hussein and Muammar Gaddafi who might be still in power if they had had workable nuclear weapons at their disposal.

Trump has succeeded in persuading Xi Jinping to put greater economic pressure on North Korea to stop conducting atomic and ballistic missile tests. Yet, China will only go so far. It has clearly no interest in bringing about the collapse of its difficult North Korean ally. Beijing appreciates the buffer state role North Korea plays for China. This is also increasingly realized in Washington. Trump's surprising announcement in late April that he would be [ready to meet with Kim Jong-un](#) under the right conditions points to this. North Korea soon indicated that Kim was also ready to meet with Trump if the circumstances were right. The election of a new moderate South Korean President, Moon Jae-in, who is much less hardline than his predecessor and in favor of multilateral talks may also prove fortunate for the de-escalation of the dangerous tension regarding North Korea. Continued North

Korean missile tests, however, are clearly undermining any efforts to deal with North Korea in a calm and reasonable way. President Moon Jae-in called the missile test in mid-May 2017, only a few days after his election, a "[reckless provocation](#)."

Still, multilateral talks with four or five participants (North Korea, South Korea, China, the U.S. and perhaps Japan) based on a realistic objective might do the trick. Such a realistic objective could be the attempt to obtain a freeze of the nuclear weapons developments in North Korea (in return for economic aid and a security guarantee). For the time being the focus should perhaps not be on achieving the entire denuclearization of the country. That way Kim Jong-un would still feel that he had a terrible weapon at his disposal to deter an invasion and enforced regime change in North Korea. This would allow him to maintain face when consenting to cease the development of even more powerful nuclear weapons as well as intercontinental ballistic missiles that could reach the US west coast. With the help of China a freeze of Pyongyang's nuclear weapons and ballistic missile developments could well be achievable. It would greatly contribute to stabilizing the region. It would largely eliminate North Korea as an unpredictable actor and a serious threat to peace while safe-guarding the well-being of the Korean people, both north and south. Yet, North Korea needs to agree to such talks and China has a lot of persuasion to do.

The “new harmony” in Chinese-American relations is a promising development. Trump’s turn from a China basher of the election campaign to a leader ready to constructively engage and deal with China’s economic and geopolitical challenges certainly deserves credit. Still, the South China Sea dispute continues to loom on the horizon; so far the Trump administration has simply ignored the issue. Trump is also fortunate that Xi’s policy is influenced by the forthcoming 19th Party Congress in Beijing. Xi expects to be re-appointed to a second five-year term as Chinese president. It makes him more ready than would otherwise be the case to avoid a serious crisis in relations with the West. It is clearly to his internal advantage if he can demonstrate his superior global leadership capabilities and his ability to [manage China’s foreign relations calmly and wisely.](#)

On the whole China seems to feel that with the ascent of the disorganized Trump administration a vacuum has arisen in global leadership that Beijing may be able to fill. [Xi Jinping’s speech at the World Economic Forum in Davos on 17 January](#), in which he came out strongly in favour of globalization and free trade and against protectionism, was an attempt to position China in such a leadership role. [Beijing’s comprehensive and impressive Belt-and-Road scheme](#) (new silk road) that encompasses almost the entire world, except North America, is also a major economic and political leadership initiative

to boost world-wide trade and stimulate global economic growth. Part of the new trade deal announced on 12 May was that Washington agreed to send the very capable NSC-China director Matthew Pottinger to the Road and Belt summit to Beijing in mid-May 2017 thereby indicating its support of Xi’s grand scheme. During the summit China announced massive funding support for the expansion of economic links between Asia, Africa and Europe to “[uphold and grow an open world economy.](#)” It is now likely that China will be welcome [to participate in a meeting for foreign investors in the U.S. in July](#), despite the widespread concern in the western world about [China’s assertive investment binge in strategically important knowledge industries.](#)

Conclusion

Trump continues to be an impulsive and unpredictable ‘leader of the free world.’ Nevertheless, in the foreign policy realm he has become much more ‘mainstream’ than expected, albeit in a hardline conservative way. In the course of his first months in office Trump appears to have arrived at the insight that for the sake of his country’s global standing and prosperity, the U.S. has no choice but to engage with its major allies and foes, look after America’s national interests and pursue the country’s resulting global objectives in cooperation with other states.

Donald Trump may never become a truly conventional President. But many of his advisers and Congress and the Courts have certainly done their best to ‘normalize’ the new President and make him shape and pursue his policy within the parameters of the U.S. constitution and established global institutions, rules and conventions. Containing Trump is not impossible it seems. As the deep crisis that broke out over the firing of FBI Director Comey on 9 May 2017 demonstrated, there is no guarantee, however, that Trump’s inherent unpredictability will not break through again. In fact, it can be expected that during his time in office Trump will contribute to bringing about plenty of further domestic and foreign policy crises. Despite the ‘mainstreaming’ of much of Trump’s foreign policy, his behavior in global affairs, therefore, may well continue to resemble a fast, wobbly and dangerous roller coaster rather than the staid pace of a solid and reliable cruise ship.

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