

## **Global Strategic Forecast 2017**

**Dr. Afsah Qazi and Saima Aman Sial**

If one were to assess what the global strategic environment may look like in 2017, a number of factors will play an important role. Elections due in several European states, in which right wing parties may form governments, will be an influential factor in determining the fate of European Union; against the background of Brexit. However, the most important defining variable of such an assessment would be the course that the US is likely to take under the President Donald Trump. This factor would matter in any case, as adjustments in the conduct of foreign policy would have been inevitable with a new administration in Washington. However, with Trump's election to the office, this variable has become more significant mainly because of the ambiguities created by his radical campaign rhetoric, some of which has started to manifest itself in the worst possible ways. Of all the areas, those in which Trump's viewpoint is largely contrasting with that of the outgoing administration are of great significance, as drastic shifts in US foreign policy can have global implications. Most important would be the ways in which the US' equation with major powers will get formulated, particularly the course that US-Russia and US-China relations might take. Moreover, how the Trump administration decides to deal with the existing and potential conflict zones in general and with Middle East and South Asia in particular will be of great importance. Lastly, the course that the debate on global issues such as nuclear non-proliferation and climate change might take under the new administration will be an important determining factor in shaping the global order.

Despite Donald Trump's unconventional views on the issues outlined above, what is yet to be seen is the extent to which his views translate into concrete policy decisions and whether or not these get modified and moderated. Since it is too early to predict how things would unfold, the best way to make a workable forecast is to keep all possibilities in mind and to assess the consequences of any of these becoming a reality. Three possible ways in which the new administration's policy might unfold in different issue-areas are: first, continuation of the status-quo; second, minor policy variations aimed at adjustments and improvements in the existing course; and lastly, radical changes or reversals in existing policies leading to substantive and largely adverse implications for the structure as well as functioning of the international order.

## **Russia**

A projection on the future trajectory of the US-Russian relations in Trump's America may be positive but not without caveats. It has been widely reported that Russia has interfered in the US elections that contributed to Trump's victory<sup>1</sup>. Moreover, Trump's choice of Rex Tillerson as US Secretary of State adds to supporters of closer cooperation with Russia at the top of America's policy-making apparatus.<sup>2</sup> So one possible future scenario, envisions better relations between Russia and US with increased cooperation on energy security issues, with the exception of climate change, if Trump ends the sanctions regime against Russia. However, geopolitics of Middle East may complicate the overall dynamics of relations, as might nuclear issues.

US' internal politics would also be a complicating factor for the Trump administration in pursuing soft policy for Russia. Powerful voices on Capitol Hill including Republicans in the

Senate are calling for a bipartisan probe into Russian interference in the 2016 presidential vote.<sup>3</sup> The unfolding of the evidence on Russian interference in the US elections may translate into increased pressure for the Trump administration to undertake tougher policy on Russia. How US-Russia relations develop in view of Trump's policies will also have an impact on security in South Asia and Afghanistan.

On nuclear issues, while responding to Russian President Putin's tweet on boosting the Russian nuclear arsenal, President Trump tweeted on 22 December that, "the United States must greatly strengthen and expand its nuclear capability until such time as the world comes to its senses regarding nukes."<sup>4</sup> He has also been reported to have said that if there was to be arms race US would 'outmatch' its adversary. These signals portend negatively for the global nuclear order and for Russia especially. The tweet has ruffled feathers in Kremlin, which is already stated to be violating the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty with the US, by building intermediate range nuclear missiles. If Trump were to continue with such a policy of outmatching his adversaries through more weapons, this may lead to unraveling of the New START agreement and the INF treaty.

A future scenario envisioning an arms build-up between US and Russia would seriously affect not only bilateral arms control prospects but also hinder any serious multilateral efforts for nuclear restraint. This would be a clear message for arms expansion to Russia, China, India and Pakistan. It may also take the spotlight away from North Korean belligerence and brandishing of nuclear weapons to the US policy of instigating an arms race globally.

## **China and East-Asia**

A forecast about US-China relations has to be based on the realization that a stable or more precisely a workable US-China equation, built upon the Sino-US rapprochement of the 1970s has been central in setting the trajectory of the two great-powers' relations as they exist today. The normalization of their relations was the starting point of China's integration into the liberal international world order that the US wanted to construct. It put an effective check on the PRC's revisionist tendencies as the Chinese world-view was seen as a major destabilizing factor for peace and security by the West then. It was also believed then that rapprochement with China would create an environment in which outright major power conflict would become unthinkable. This goal has been achieved to a large extent if we look at the state of US-China relations now.

Despite a number of differences over issues of crucial importance, head-on conflict and confrontation is not considered an option by either of the two sides. This is because several rules of engagement that were set have been rigorously followed, leading to the outcome that US and China are interdependent on each other to the extent that co-existence is all they can think of i.e, it is no longer a zero-sum game. This non-zero-sum game was expected to continue for the foreseeable future until the results of US Presidential elections were revealed. Unfortunately, Donald Trump's ideas and his policy agendas fall contrary to the values that have represented America for long.

With regard to relations with China, some volte-face is expected as can be seen from his most recent acts and assertions. If a US President is having second thoughts over One-China policy, this is not normal<sup>5</sup> and for this to be the new normal, a lot will have

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to be compromised leading to major upheavals in the international system. Seeing his commitment to identify and target China as a currency manipulator and to use trade negotiations as a way to bargain on other issues, it appears as if the new President is not fully cognizant of the degree to which the interests of the two parties are intertwined.

If US adopts a more confrontational approach towards China, under the new administration, it will be greatly detrimental to the cause of peace and security at both regional and international levels. China has always stayed fully committed to protecting and defending its vital interests if and when challenged or provoked. It can go to any length to pursue this goal. So, altering the principles underlying decades old engagement policy towards China will constitute a provocation on the part of US, setting the path towards continuous deterioration of the most significant bilateral relationship in the world.

If Trump's rhetoric is brought to reality, US alliance system in East Asia will also get severely impacted in addition to the above. This again is linked to his ambition to make America more isolationist for which he wants to disengage American security forces from distant theaters. To this end, he wants US' allies in the region, importantly South Korea and Japan to take greater responsibility of their defense and security needs.<sup>6</sup> Such a policy move will greatly undermine US influence in the region as its reputation and resolve will come under great challenge. Getting such signals from their treaty allies, America's East Asian partners will be forced to align with China as the regional power to ensure that a China threat does not loom over their vital interests in the region. A more antagonized China will no longer see an incentive for staying integrated in the order that US created and thus, will try to revisit the system as per its

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needs. If this happens, the US, after it considerably disengages from the region, will not have enough power to keep a check on China. The result may be what the US least desires, i.e. an atmosphere of tension with China that would become a new norm in global politics.

## **Middle East**

President Trump's ideas about dealing with Middle East have been mixed and confusing.<sup>7</sup> He is in favor of America to have a more isolationist policy but at the same time, he wants to fight and defeat ISIS aggressively. Moving towards an isolationist course would hit the very base of the post-World War-II international order that the US envisaged and has invested greatly in.

The US has been repeatedly criticized for its half-hearted efforts and lack of commitment towards improving the situation in Middle East. The blind eye it turned towards ISIS has had two-fold consequences. One, the appeal for the US norms and foreign policy values started getting diminished, with its capacity to lead being greatly questioned. Secondly, as a result of US indifference, Middle East has become further destabilized with all regional players pursuing their narrow interests at the cost of regional peace and stability. If the trend continues, a more unstable Middle East will be a real drag on American drive to be great again.

If defeating ISIS becomes the defining feature of US policy in the region, which Donald Trump seems greatly inclined towards, this might bring some hope for the region. A genuine commitment to fighting ISIS without aiming at removing Assad, would be an improvement of, but not a drastic shift from the previous administration's policy. This is because ISIS is one of

the most eminent concerns for not any single region but for global peace and security. Moreover, a flawed American approach to Middle East has been widely responsible for the current chaos in the region. It is therefore important for the US to correct the previous wrongs if it wishes to move towards a better future.

In this regard, President Trump's pronouncements for fighting ISIS<sup>8</sup> in collaboration with its regional allies and partners, and that too, without aiming for regime change in Syria, is actually a promising one. What causes concern instead is his hardline approach towards Iran where he wants to go back on the nuclear deal and revive sanctions.<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, the two goals, i.e. fighting ISIS and isolating Iran cannot be simultaneously pursued, as for fighting ISIS in Syria, Iran has to be taken onboard or the entire effort might lead to nothing substantive. It is therefore advisable for the new President to reconcile these two goals because working with Iran, a major Assad ally, would be a pre-requisite if ISIS is to be defeated in Syria. Additionally, the policy line that Donald Trump wants to adopt towards Muslims is also inconsistent with the set goal and its materialization would only add to the deterioration dynamic. These two contradictions may cause the US policy in the region to be as muddled as before.

## **South Asia**

For South Asia, 2017 would carry forth the current tensions in the India Pakistan relations as well the embroiling conflict in Afghanistan that stands far from being settled as yet.

- (a) Pakistan-India:** A lack of political will in India to undertake structured dialogue with Pakistan and its insistence on talks based on single agenda i.e. terrorism; are likely trends

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that would continue, as would the Indian efforts towards so-called isolation of Pakistan. If Trump's campaign politics is any guide, U.S is likely to look at Pakistan increasingly through an Indian prism.<sup>10</sup> The other possibility of US taking on the role of a possible mediator between India Pakistan disputes is less likely. Although Trump made some statements indicating that he would like to play the role of a mediator, however it is highly unlikely for the US to undertake any move which may unnerve its strategic ally, India.

On the issue of terrorism, Modi may move beyond the initial efforts (read rhetoric) of isolating Pakistan to undertaking limited strikes within Pakistan's territory to assuage the increasing public pressure before the 2019 elections. However, he may need to check with the US Administration about such a move; he might not find the Administration agreeable in this regard.

- (b) Pakistan:** One can portend that in a most likely scenario, Pakistan's relevance to the US would matter mainly in two respects. Firstly, US would seek cooperation especially in intelligence sharing and action against the Haqqani network allegedly operating through Pakistan and secondly it would pressurize Pakistan to make serious efforts in ensuring peace inside India, i.e. stopping cross-border terrorism. Although much would depend on how Trump's foreign policy experts shape his agenda, however the administration's policy on building a strong relationship with India is a constant that would increasingly strain the already transactional relationship between US and Pakistan. With India getting closer to US under the Trump presidency, Pakistan's relevance in Afghan peace process may also get minimized. This was already manifest in the

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Heart of Asia Conference<sup>11</sup>, where India and Afghanistan ignored all diplomatic niceties and blamed Pakistan as a state-sponsor of terrorism. Needless to say, that such a US policy will impress upon Pakistan the need to look into diversification of foreign relations with Russia and European powers, apart from getting pulled further into the Chinese camp. For Pakistan, a natural course of action should be to reiterate its resolve to fight all terrorist groups indiscriminately through effective implementation of National Action Plan.

One factor that will have to be seen is how Trump's anti-Muslim rhetoric<sup>12</sup> applies to Pakistan. It may mean a tougher policy for Pakistan. Being ultra-nationalist, Trump backed by a Republican Senate, may condition all cooperation/aid to Pakistan on action against the Haqqani network. In a worse-case scenario, this may translate into US unilateral action against alleged terrorists operating from Pakistan's territory. Any future terrorist incident in India or Afghanistan that can possibly be traced back to Pakistan could trigger such consequences.

- (c) Afghanistan:** The unfolding dynamics of stability in Afghanistan are closely linked with involvement from the neighboring states. Hence the neighboring states of Russia, Pakistan and China have initiated a strategic dialogue addressing the future questions of stability in Afghanistan. Though the Trump administration indicated that it sees India as a security provider in the region, however, Russia, Pakistan and China are eagerly pursuing trilateral strategic dialogue on Afghanistan<sup>13</sup>, which would in future involve Afghanistan itself in the process as well. Therefore, the future forecast on Afghanistan's stability will be based on the consideration that there is a realignment of states with

respect to their interests in stability in Afghanistan. This realignment may pitch US and India against Russia, China and Pakistan. It may also limit US' influence in Afghanistan's future. What is not clear is how the Trump administration would respond to this evolving dynamic, given his desire to distance US from the war in Afghanistan.

**(d) Nuclear Issues:** With a natural disposition of being unpredictable, Trump has generally been reluctant in clearly outlining his Administration's policy on dealing with Pakistan's nuclear weapons program but has made clear that such dealing on nuclear issues would involve India. During his campaign President Trump advocated using India to check Pakistan<sup>14</sup>, a state which he dubbed to be the most dangerous threat after North Korea. Trump has reportedly stated that Indian military muscle would help in "keeping a check on Pakistan".<sup>15</sup> This approach will have serious ramifications for Pakistan's nuclear policy. If the US chooses to follow this approach, it would seriously undermine Pakistan's efforts to highlight Indian offensive capabilities and doctrines in the conventional domain as well the nuclear build-up that pose serious challenges to the deterrence stability in the region. At yet another level, this approach would lead to a total disregard of Pakistan's threat perception vis-à-vis India and in turn increase pressure on Pakistan to take measures for controlling vertical proliferation in a complete disregard to its regional compulsions.

The close US-India relationship on the nuclear front, is already translating into strategic anxiety in Pakistan of declining leverage in Washington and increased prospect of Indian policy-line driving the decisions on nuclear South Asia in Washington.

The debate on NSG, may take either a decisive course in the coming year or stay in limbo depending on the new administration's policy, which is far from clear at the present. If the Trump administration demonstrates the same zeal as the Obama administration in pursuing Indian membership<sup>16</sup>, it may advocate the step based approach to membership expansion, which would mean that India gets in first, with a so-called assurance of not blocking future membership prospects of other contenders. This approach would be a serious set-back to Pakistan. As the current 'commitments', propagated as criteria, are similar to the lax political commitments India undertook while gaining the NSG waiver.<sup>17</sup> More importantly, since Pakistan has not undertaken steps like the separation of civilian and military nuclear facilities and signing of additional protocol etc., its case may get 'postponed' for now.

In what could be considered as an improvement in prospects for Pakistan's membership, Trump administration may let the process take its own course; which would mean, a stringent nonproliferation criterion for non-NPT NWS. Much would then depend on how strongly Pakistan can lobby with states like Austria, New Zealand, Ireland, and Turkey apart from China; to seek a balanced criterion.

### **Other Issues**

One aspect in which the strategic outlook of 2017 might differ from that of recent years is that the agenda for addressing climate change and global warming might get pushed to oblivion. Calling 'Climate Change' a 'hoax' is the most uninformed of his remarks.<sup>18</sup> Donald Trump is in favor of a pro-fossil fuel energy policy; a policy that the entire

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world has been trying to move away from for a couple of decades now, with US as the frontrunner of this campaign. US going back on its climate change commitments will leave the entire effort astray. Also it will turn out to be a big disfavor to the American desire for world leadership. The move will demonstrate its lack of resolve for provision of public goods, something that has been the defining feature of the US-led world order. Similar may be the fate of the multilateral trade negotiation or the Doha development round as Trump seems ever-more intransigent over cutting unequal trade bargains meant to facilitate the developing countries by alleviating their due concerns. If Trump's agenda for climate change and trade comes to fruition, divisiveness might over-shadow the integrative trends that have been achieved through collective efforts of international community over decades; the world will go two steps backward instead of taking one step forward.

It is therefore expected and hoped that institutional and administrative constraints will play their part in modifying Trump's ideas in the best interests of all parties and most importantly, the US. It is Donald Trump's exceptional understanding of American interests that needs to be correctly formulated if a US-led order has to be sustained or else all the good work done might go wasted.

Ms Saima Aman Sial and Dr. Afsa Qazi are  
Senior Research Officers at CISS

## **End Notes**

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<sup>5</sup> “Rapprochement with China, 1972”, *Office of the Historian*, available at <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1969-1976/rapprochement-china>

<sup>6</sup> “Trump remarks prompt debate over cost of Japan-U.S. defense ties”, *The Japan Times*, May 16, 2016, available at <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2016/05/16/reference/trump-remarks-prompt-debate-cost-japan-u-s-defense-ties/>

<sup>7</sup> Tamar Rabinovich, “Trump’s Middle East Muddle”, November 15, 2016, *The American Interest*, available at <http://www.the-american-interest.com/2016/11/15/trumps-middle-east-muddle/>

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<sup>11</sup> Ghani, Modi lash out at Pakistan on terrorism at Heart of Asia moot in Amritsar”, *Dawn*, December 5, 2016, available at <http://www.dawn.com/news/1300452>

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<sup>18</sup> “Trump Has Called Climate Change a Chinese Hoax. Beijing Says It Is Anything But.”, *The New York times*, November 18, 2016, available at <<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/19/world/asia/china-trump-climate-change.html>>