



# How Donald Trump has **changed the world**

Harsh V. Pant  
Editor

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# Introduction

**HARSH V. PANT**

**A**s the United States (US) heads to its 59<sup>th</sup> quadrennial election, described by many as one of the most consequential in recent memory, it is time to take stock of the fundamental elements of the Trump administration's foreign policy. Donald Trump has been called a "great disruptor"—one who has challenged some of the most longstanding assumptions not only about American domestic politics but also his nation's foreign-policy priorities. His 'America First' rhetoric won him the White House in 2016, belying all predictions and assessments of him being a candidate bereft of substance. The American people—tired of their country's multiple wars, angry over widespread economic dislocation, and polarised beyond recognition—put their trust on Trump as a non-establishment candidate.

Once in office, President Trump continued to generate strong reactions from all sides. Four years later, the American electorate will decide whether to vote Trump back to office or to give an establishment figure like Joe Biden a chance at the presidency; the rest of the world will have to live with the consequences of this choice. American presidents, by virtue of their country's global heft, always tend to have an outsized influence in shaping global realities. Trump, too, has not disappointed. In more ways than one, his policies have impacted the global order in every single domain: China and the emerging balance of power in the Indo-Pacific, the transatlantic divide, trade and technology, and the multilateral order.

In this report, ORF seeks to engage with the question of how far Trump's oratory matches the realities on the ground. Has he truly been as disruptive as is often claimed? Or have structural factors pushed him into a direction where a more nuanced reading of his foreign policy is needed? Can we make a clear distinction between issue areas insofar as Trump's imprint is concerned? Is there a method to his seeming madness?

To assess the influence of Trump's presidency on global politics, we present here, analyses by ORF researchers that examine various geographies and issue areas and ascertain how disruptive in fact Trump has been. As this survey underscores, the Trump presidency's impact on the world is much more complex than is often easily

assumed. There is far greater continuity in Trump's foreign policy than what his critics — and some of his own outlandish tweets and statements — would have us believe. Across geographies and domains, there are significant divergences that we need to examine to properly evaluate the likely long-term impact that Trump will have on the global landscape. Whether he is re-elected or voted out, the debate on his legacy will certainly not end with the announcement of the election results.



# China: From Trade to Security in Asia, Catching the Dragon by its Tail

KARTIK BOMMAKANTI



*Getty Images*

The most disruptive event in the four years of the Trump presidency has been his administration's trade war with the People's Republic of China (PRC), with Trump pushing back against what it calls China's predatory trade practices and intellectual property theft. The 'great divide' between Washington and Beijing that had simmered for many years before Trump came to office, has crystallised into open hostility. The imposition of tariffs and counter-tariffs has been the most visible element of Trump's trade war against the PRC. Trump ramped up pressure against China by raising tariffs on a wide range of products, including machinery and motorcycles. Under Trump, the US has emphatically called out China's predatory trade practices which has involved the grant of heavy subsidies to key sectors, thereby preventing foreign companies and investors from penetrating and competing in the Chinese market.

To be sure, the US' trade deficit vis-à-vis China has been a source of consternation for successive American administrations dating back to at least the mid-1980s. Yet, none of them succeeded in forcing the PRC to commit to a trade deal with Washington that addresses American concerns. The Trump administration itself is yet to secure a deal that involves China buying more American goods. What it has achieved is that it has compelled the PRC to commit provisionally in January 2020 to reduce the deficit by approximately US\$ 200 billion.

The US' other key concern is the PRC's continuing theft of its Intellectual Property (IP). It is estimated that the US economy loses some US\$ 600 billion annually due to the PRC's pilferage, ranging from technical know-how through cyber means, to purloining movies. Liabilities for US companies investing in the PRC increased largely on account of China's mandating that they divest business secrets that are proprietary and involve significant investment to develop.

The second disruptive aspect of the Trump presidency is related to the US' relations on the PRC's periphery, particularly the Korean Peninsula. Regardless of the setbacks, the Trump administration's decision to engage Pyongyang in direct talks was undoubtedly disruptive to the extent that it caught Beijing off-guard, as well as Washington's ally – the Republic of Korea (RoK) or South Korea.

Finally, the Trump administration's national security strategy in the context of the Indo-Pacific has brought strategic competition back to the region to contest Chinese revisionism and aggression. The US introduced the principle of 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' (FOIP), making it a central tenet that will directly counter China's quest for hegemony in the region. Under Trump, the Indo-Pacific region has witnessed a more skillful embrace of three states—i.e., Japan, India and Australia—as part of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (or the Quad). There has also been a more robust engagement with Taiwan, and a significant expansion in Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) in the South China Sea (SCS) and the East China Sea (ECS).

Overall, President Trump has shaken up the landscape in the Indo-Pacific unlike any one of his predecessors by reviving competition and making it the core element of US strategy. If he fails to win a second term, his successor cannot ignore the changes that he has wrought; sustaining the momentum in the region will be an imperative.

# South Asia: Ending, or Losing, an ‘Endless War’ in Afghanistan?

SHUBHANGI PANDEY



*Afghanistan Government Website*

Many analysts describe US President Donald Trump's foreign policies as "transactional" in nature: resulting in multilateral equations based on personal diplomacy, rather than forward-looking geopolitical imperatives. It is noteworthy, therefore, that Trump's stated policy objectives vis-à-vis South Asia have been characterised by continuity rather than change, when compared with previous US administrations. Still, while the larger strategic objectives may be holding up a mirror to past US discourses in South Asia, the tools employed to achieve them have been different and disruptive in many ways.

The earliest and most visible manifestation of the US' rigorous appraisal of regional dynamics was perhaps Trump's South Asia Strategy that focused on ending the war in Afghanistan, while staying cognisant of the potentially dire consequences



of a hasty exit amidst emboldened militancy. The new approach provided for increased devolution of decision-making powers to the military, in order to more efficiently tackle terror groups operating in the region. It also made troop withdrawal contingent upon the fulfilment of certain conditions on the ground, instead of being a time-bound exercise, in an effort to compel the insurgents to agree to engage in negotiations to end the conflict.

Against this background, the historic US-Taliban deal and initiation of intra-Afghan talks, after much contention over the issue of prisoner release, marked a clear success for Trump. At the same time, the deal raised serious concerns within the Afghan government, vis-à-vis the possibility of the Taliban regaining political power, and a potentially compromised republic in the future. Moreover, the deal compelled a recalibration of strategic postures amongst key regional stakeholders, particularly in the immediate neighbourhood.

Given Pakistan's geographically strategic location and influence over the Taliban, the country's importance in US efforts to stabilise Afghanistan, was not lost on anyone in Washington, even before Trump came to office. Arguably, it is for that reason that Trump's predecessors chose to overlook Pakistan's disruptive role in Afghanistan, in favour of using Pakistani territory to supply reinforcements to the US troops in Afghanistan. Trump, on the other hand, departed from convention by imposing military aid cuts on Pakistan, citing the lack of action by Islamabad in dismantling terror camps within its territory. However, even Trump proved incapable of wishing away the importance of Pakistan in the US' strategic calculus; soon after revoking significant aid to Pakistan, he began to pursue a reset in US-Pak ties – much to India's dismay.

Another move that threatened to disrupt existing regional dynamics was Trump's decision to explicitly call upon India to play a bigger role in Afghanistan – a move that Washington had previously refrained from, apprehensive of offending Pakistan's political sensibilities. India, looking for ways to combat Pakistan's efforts at sabotaging Indian presence in Afghanistan, welcomed Trump's invitation to deepen engagement with Afghanistan. While strategic ties between India and the US have progressively strengthened since, economic relations have remained strained, as divergent economic priorities have often threatened to undermine strategic convergences. However, despite underwhelming economic ties and Trump's unwelcome propositions to mediate on Kashmir, New Delhi has remained firm on its commitment to its strategic partnership with the US – a relationship that continues to be central to the US' strategic objectives in South Asia as well.

# East and Southeast Asia: A New Definition for a Pivot to Asia?

PRATNASHREE BASU AND SREEPARNA BANERJEE



US Embassy in Laos

If the Indo-Pacific is indeed the theatre of the 'new great game', then Southeast and East Asia are at the heart of it. Gloomy forewarnings regarding a perceived lack of trust in the US as a Pacific power, coupled with apparently inconsistent economic policies of Washington amongst countries in the region, have been closely followed by calls for an Asia Pivot 2.0 by Joe Biden, should he win the presidency. The reality is different, though. From a geopolitical standpoint, the Trump administration has contributed constructively to the policy approaches geared towards the preservation of regional stability and the encouragement of alliances.

This has, in turn, emboldened the positions of countries in the region which had previously been reticent and equivocal. For example, despite reservations of some countries in the region, ASEAN's adoption of its *Outlook on the Indo-Pacific in 2019* confirms the organisation's intent to assume a more robust position regarding the aggressive and overbearing actions of China. The US position on maritime claims in the South China Sea released in July, and other policy documents on strategic requirements in the region, have been more clearly and strongly-worded than past ones constructed in ambiguous legalese. An important aspect that will

continue to mark US involvement in Southeast Asia is its engagement with the ASEAN, which would rightly want to maintain its centrality in the region and not allow it to be hijacked by external forces.

In East Asia, Japan and South Korea continue to be the linchpins of the US' North-East Asia policy. To be sure, Japan and the US' bilateral relations have flourished in recent years, as the two countries find themselves with shared geopolitical interests. The US reaffirmed its commitment to the 1960 US-Japan Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security and enhanced its ambit to include the Senkaku islands, on which Japan has a dispute with China. At the same time, Trump succeeded in his demands for access to the Japanese agriculture market. This would offset the forfeited benefits promised by the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade deal from which the US has withdrawn.

The Korean peninsula, meanwhile, has been a difficult template. There are trade issues between Washington and Seoul, and Trump's efforts at reining in North Korea's nuclear programme failed.

While some countries would prefer to stay clear of the competition of might between the US and China, it is also clear that apprehensions regarding Beijing offset such concerns and could instead make them lean more on the US and/or US-led coalitions to balance against the weight of China. For instance, Vietnam and Indonesia, two major middle powers, together with South Korea and New Zealand have expressed their interest in joining a Quad-Plus framework. A Pew Research Centre Survey earlier this year showed a greater degree of favourability for the US in comparison to China across countries in the region. COVID-19, too, has caused a reassessment of manufacturing hubs and supply chains; in the near future, this would put the spotlight on Southeast Asian nations as potential alternatives to established networks.

At its core, the overarching question in this part of the world is one of safeguarding a rules-based order as opposed to allowing interventionist forces to gain ground. The next US administration will be tested on the nature of the world order that will follow from this contest.

# Oceania: A Bolder Australia with Trump in Asia

PREMESH SAHA



Getty Images

The Trump administration's domestic and foreign policies have created an impact on the US' relations with most countries across the globe, including in Oceania. According to a poll conducted by the Lowy Institute in March 2020, just 30 percent of Australians had "some" or "a lot of confidence" in Trump's foreign policy. Moreover, Australians are widely rejecting Trump's "America first" policies, which include the imposition of tariffs on imports or US withdrawal from international agreements such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade deal. The withdrawal from the TPP, which was strongly supported by the Australian government, has raised doubts amongst policymakers, strategists, and analysts in Australia about Washington's commitment to maintain a viable strategic and economic presence in Asia. The ongoing US-China tensions—including those related to trade, disputes in the South China Sea, and the origins of the novel coronavirus—

have put middle-power countries like Australia in a tough spot. The challenge facing Australia's policymakers is being "compelled" to choose sides between its largest trading partner, China, and its long-term security ally, the US. Australian analysts also hold the view that the ongoing US-China trade war will have a detrimental effect on Australia.

To be sure, President Trump's economic policies have created rifts in US-Australia bilateral ties. According to a report by the *Financial Review*, "the attacks on the World Trade Organisation, the indiscriminate use of tariffs - sometimes for non-trade-related issues - a growing reliance on agricultural subsidies" are issues of major difference between the two. Further, President Trump's open declaration to "economically punish countries he feels are ripping off the American worker" does not bode well for US relations in the region. President Trump's position on climate change does not help, either. With statements such as, for instance—"The concept of global warming was created by and for the Chinese in order to make US manufacturing non-competitive"—Trump will cause a strain in ties with countries in the Oceania region, for whom the threat of global warming is only too real.

The silver lining in US-Australia relations might be found in the area of security. The US has a satellite surveillance base at Pine Gap in Central Australia, and regularly deploys Marines to Darwin. In April 2020, an Australian frigate joined three US warships in the contested South China Sea for a joint exercise. These show Australia's importance in the US' Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy. Indeed, the US and Australia are part of the Quadrilateral alliance (or the Quad) which has been elevated to the Ministerial level with two meetings held, the most recent one being in Tokyo. The Quad has begun engaging militarily, with the next round of the Malabar naval exercises involving the four countries being planned for November 2020.

In the US' Indo-Pacific strategy, northern Pacific states (under the Compact of Free Association) is expected to receive more attention from the US government and Washington will continue to rely more on Australia and New Zealand to provide aid to South Pacific states. To compete with China's fast-growing loan schemes, Washington is pledging more support for infrastructure development in the Indo-Pacific region through the BUILD Act passed in June 2018. Given the growing Chinese investment in the South Pacific since 2006, these island nations are also put in a difficult spot where they need to make a choice between US and Chinese investments.

The US, Australia and Japan are looking to finance the connection of a submarine internet cable to the Pacific island nation of Palau, in a project meant to counterweight the rising Chinese economic influence in the region. Australia



recognises China's growing threat to the maintenance of a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific, and it is making efforts to push back: it has taken a tough stance against China's Huawei, and is calling for an independent investigation into the origins of the novel coronavirus. Even as the US and Australia, however, do share common strategic objectives in the region, their interests and threat perceptions in relation to China are far from being symmetrical.

# Europe: The Institutions with US Have Held Stronger than You Think

KASHISH PARPIANI



*Getty Images*

United States President Donald Trump's break with tradition on transatlantic ties has involved Eurosceptic rhetoric and demands for balance in America's economic ties with the European Union (EU) and under the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Empirical evidence, however, shows that Trump's record has in fact been mixed, with some notable policy-level achievements and other contentions predating his tenure.

On trade, after the Trump administration's sweeping imposition of tariffs on imported steel and aluminium, and Europe retaliating with their own tariffs, the next significant point of tension came only in 2019. The US tariffed European planes, wine, cheese, and other products, after the World Trade Organization (WTO) permitted Washington to act on European exports of up to US\$7.5 billion. This was in response to a 16-year dispute on the US accusing Europe of subsidizing

Airbus. Similarly, the spectre of Europe imposing tariffs on US\$ 4 billion worth of US products emerged, after WTO ruled on Europe's 2005 counter-complaint on the US subsidising Boeing. Apart from such issues that predate Trump, tensions mostly remained confined to the rhetoric level and the two sides even announced in 2020 their first duty reductions in over two decades.

Similarly, on collective security, Trump rallied against the lack of equitable burden-sharing amongst NATO members. However, his hyperbolic threats aside, Trump's last two predecessors also repeatedly pushed for increased NATO defence spending, with Barack Obama even referring to Europeans as "free riders". Moreover, in lending credence to Trump's approach, the tally of NATO members that spend two percent of their GDP on defence has risen to 10, from just three in 2014. Furthermore, the Trump administration has supported collective security by re-establishing the Atlantic-based US 2nd Fleet, spearheading operational initiatives like the 'Four Thirties' on force readiness, and supporting regional capacity-building via platforms like the Three Seas Initiative.

Nevertheless, criticism of Trump's record based on an idealised reading of transatlantic ties has continued, ignoring not only old faultlines but also recent policy gains. This has assumed a catalytic effect, resulting in the emergence of a push for greater European "strategic autonomy". European leaders argue for an active European foreign policy by openly questioning US credibility: "The era in which we could fully rely on others is over"; "barriers behind which Europe could blossom have disappeared"; and, "thanks to him [Trump] we have got rid of all illusions". Although initially limited to addressing Trump's 'disruptions', as with Europe exercising greater control over its interests amidst transatlantic divergences on Iran (via measures like the INSTEX), European assertiveness is increasingly assuming its own character.

On addressing long-standing dissonance in European agenda-setting, deliberations are underway on shedding the requirement for unanimity amongst member states on foreign policy issues, in favour of "qualified majority". This could be pivotal in forging, for instance, a pan-European stance on the Indo-Pacific. In addition, after long viewing China solely from an economic standpoint, the EU has now termed it as a "systemic rival" to formulate a holistic approach on defending its interests and values. This has been evident with proposals on guarding against predatory acquisitions by government-subsidised Chinese investors and limiting export of surveillance technology that helps operationalise China's digital authoritarianism.

Therefore, in the larger scheme of Europe belatedly meeting its moment, Trump's 'disruptions' that now unduly dominate analyses on transatlantic ties could eventually become mere footnotes to history.

# West Asia: Deal-Making and Deal-Breaking for Peace in the Middle East

KABIR TANEJA



Getty Images

During his 2016 electoral campaign, President Donald Trump criticised the Iran nuclear deal which came into effect in October 2015 after months of arduous negotiations between Tehran, the UN Security Council members, and Germany (known as the P5+1). The deal was to end the Iranian nuclear programme in return for bringing the country back into the global economic mainstream; it was at the time being celebrated as an opening to end a long-standing impasse with Tehran. Yet, Trump's disruptive take on politics in West Asia (Middle East) began well before

True to his campaign promise, Trump withdrew the US from the Iran deal in May 2018. Although expected, it was perhaps Trump's single-most disruptive, critical

decision that has drastically changed the trajectory of American policy towards the region. To be sure, “disruption” itself is not an alien concept in the region, and much of what the US has had to contend with in the Middle East is still the ongoing fallout of the Arab Spring, a people’s movement gone wrong and hijacked by vested interests.

Trump’s approach has been largely personality-led, with undertones of short-term gains and personal victories acting as the strongest motivations. Bringing “peace” to the Middle East, a long-standing chimera of a succession of American presidents and their foreign policy thrusts, was Trump’s aim—all the while, maintaining a strong-arm posture against Iran. Trump’s policy of not allowing Iran to successfully achieve a metamorphosis into a regional power beyond what it currently is, found traction within the Gulf power centres, and Israel as well. Indeed, former President Barack Obama’s approach to the Middle East was seen as “distant” and being “cold” towards the absolute power of Gulf monarchs, despite them being allies. Meanwhile, Trump is seen as a return to the “normal”, and the return of an American security blanket against Iran, and perhaps increasingly and more boldly, Turkey, a NATO ally.

However, Trump’s agendas have been more self-centred, of those preserving his legacy as a president who achieved all those tasks that other presidents had failed to. This was recognised by the Gulf leaders, who have put their support behind Trump in the form of the much-touted normalisation agreement between the UAE and Israel, later joined by Bahrain as well, signed in September 2020. While Trump claimed the limelight around the signing of the Abraham Accords and the political mainstreaming between Abu Dhabi and Jerusalem, the likes of Israel and UAE were willing to play along as they consolidated their own interests regionally, specifically against Tehran, and also helping each other in consolidating power within Washington D.C. itself for future reference.

Trump’s withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal set in motion a flurry of changes in the region, including an Iran – China strategic agreement that could push Tehran’s nuclear programme closer to Beijing’s ambit. However, the most significant disruption had in fact to do with American foreign policy in motion during the Obama presidency itself. For the Gulf, Trump returned to the pre-Obama status quo, that of cornering Iran, increasing sanctions on the back of the same providing likes of Israel, UAE and others with top-of-the line defence technology. Iran may now find no incentive to return to the negotiating table with the US, with or without Trump. This could lead to more years of animosity and political distance between the US, Iran and the wider Gulf states.



# Russia: The Residual Cold War over Democracy, Elections and Influence

NIVEDITA KAPOOR



*Getty Images*

Even before Donald Trump became president, the US' relations with Russia were already on a downward spiral, particularly since the 2014 Ukrainian crisis that led to western sanctions on Russia. The US intelligence report on Russian attempts to interfere in the 2016 presidential elections worsened the situation and has since formed the backdrop of US-Russia relations – both driving the policy agenda as well as thwarting any constructive cooperation. Despite Trump's declaration of building an "extraordinary relationship", the broad political sentiment in Washington has steadfastly remained against Russia. The Congressional action in passing strict sanction laws has made any relief inconceivable in the short term.

The combined effects of Congressional actions and incoherent policy by the current administration have created a situation not seen in US-Russia ties since the collapse

of the Soviet Union. The disruption of regular diplomatic efforts has resulted in the neglect of crucial issues of strategic stability and arms control, with New START set to expire in February 2021 and no clear plan of action yet for its extension.

The US sanctions have failed to achieve the desired impact in terms of altering Russian behaviour. On the contrary, it has pushed Moscow further towards Beijing at a time of rising US-China tensions, strengthening the position of the two countries that it has labelled as rivals. This is not to say that Russia has attempted to repair the relationship, either. Apart from the Ukraine crisis, other issues have made it difficult for proponents in Washington to lobby for more cordial relations with Moscow: the MH 17 plane crash, Russia's interference in the 2016 US election, the UK Skripal poisoning in 2018, and the most recent poisoning of opposition leader Alexey Navalny.

These same crises make it imperative that dialogue take centre stage—to establish clear rules of competition and to identify areas of mutual interest for cooperation. In a sharp departure from tradition, Trump and Russian president Vladimir Putin met only once in 2018 for a full-fledged summit. The Cold War tradition of a realist, pragmatic behaviour to avoid any dangerous escalation between the world's two largest nuclear powers has been missing in the past four years. Indeed, this is an unprecedented situation wherein the two countries are caught up in the cycle of sanctions and countersanctions, expulsions and counter-expulsions, allegations and counter-allegations – with neither side showing any clear attempt at breaking the logjam. Meanwhile, Russia remains steadfast in its desire to maintain a sphere of influence in its neighbourhood. It has fundamentally opposed US hegemony and unilateral actions, NATO expansion and colour revolutions in the form of mass protests leading to regime change in the former Soviet space—with no concessions in sight.

The disruption of policy on Russia has taken place both due to the election of Trump and the circumstances of that election which led to the deterioration of an already-strained relationship. The factors that have led Moscow and Washington to the current stage are not merely the result of one electoral cycle. The ongoing confrontation appears to be systemic in nature. The post-Cold War period continues to witness a fundamental divergence of opinion between the US and Russia about the future world order, their respective roles in the international system, and their own geopolitical interests.

# Central Asia: Gaining More from Beijing than Washington D.C.

AYJAZ WANI



*Getty Images*

In February 2020 the Trump administration renewed its strategy in Central Asia which, in the recent decades, has come under the increasing influence of China. The US has come to recognise the region—referred to as the “heart of Asia”—as crucial not only in its race with China for global dominance, but also in its efforts to fortify its position in its geopolitical rivalry with Russia. The renewed strategy came after a gap of five years and followed US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo’s visit to Central Asia to participate in a C5+1 High Level Dialogue.

While the C5+1 helped the US expand its footprint in the region, Pompeo’s visit happened at a time when the Central Asian Republics (CAR) are liberalising their

political and economic institutions. Apart from the regular agenda that included discussions on topics such as good governance, trade, economic and political reforms, and energy connectivity, Pompeo's visit also galvanised voices in the CAR against Beijing's treatment of the Uyghurs and Kazaks. Pompeo tried to use the Uyghur card to gain maximum support for the US and challenge Beijing on its borders. Pompeo asked his Central Asian counterparts to offer asylum to these ethnic minorities fleeing persecution in Xinjiang, and to "beware of China". Since then, however, none of the Central Asian countries have come out strongly against China's treatment of their ethnic brethren.

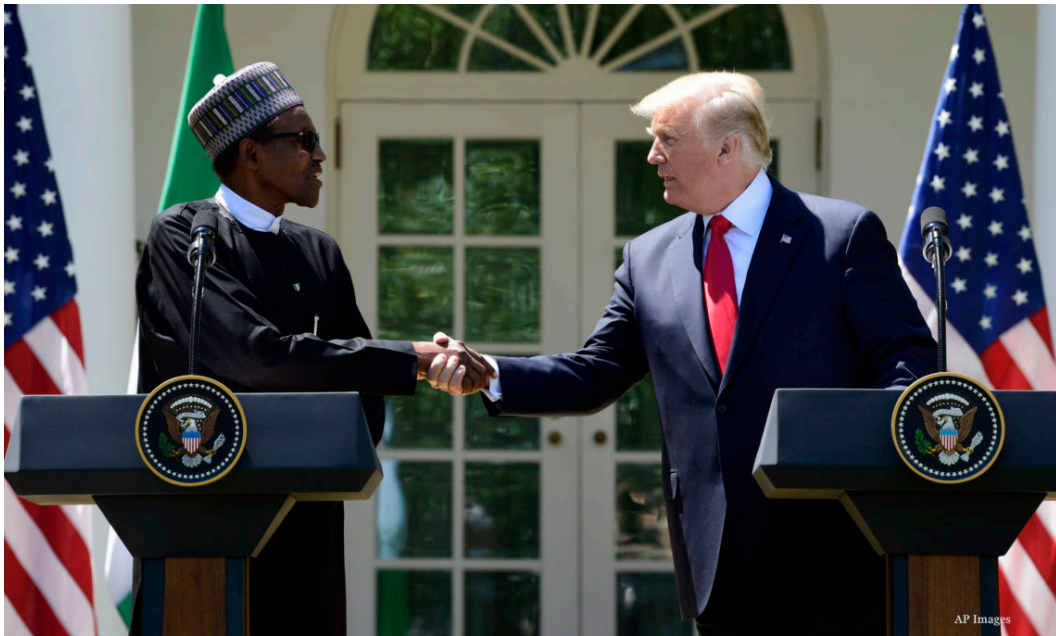
The US' Central Asian strategy calls for multilateral diplomacy with like-minded countries to support these countries' "sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity". However, like those of his predecessors, Trump's policy stresses on filling the shortcomings in the region—i.e., upholding the rule of law, promoting respect for human rights, and creating inclusive political systems through elections. These flaws have always been a sore point between the global democratic south and the Central Asian region and have been readily exploited by China to increase its dominance in its CAR neighbourhood.

However, despite the late thrust in 2020, Trump's Central Asian policy has largely remained inconsistent, under-resourced and uncompetitive. It has also gained little buy-in for President Trump's anti-Muslim rhetoric. In January 2020 Trump added Kyrgyzstan—considered the most democratic country in the region—to the US' restricted travel list.

Indeed, Trump's Central Asian strategy has been largely reactive and restrained. The lack of interest in the region under the Trump administration has given a freehand to Beijing to exercise its influence over the autocratic regimes of the region. Unlike its predecessors, the Trump administration has tried to increase the US' geopolitical competition in Central Asia with China, Russia and Iran, but has largely failed to impress the region's leaders. The absence of a comprehensive Central Asian policy under Trump has paved the way for China and Russia to more clearly project their interests in the heart of Asia.

# Africa: Is a Lack of Disruption a Boon or Bane for the Future?

ABHISHEK MISHRA



*US Embassy and Consulate in Nigeria*

When US President Donald Trump took office in 2017, his administration seemed poised to make major changes to the country's policy in Africa. The longstanding US goals of advancing democracy and governance, peace and security, trade and investment, and development in the continent remain valid. However, the pursuit of these objectives has increasingly lost focus, becoming fixated with inputs rather than outcomes. As Africa becomes more populous, young, mobile, networked, and educated, these transformations, as well as emerging political, economic, and security trends, are increasing Africa's significance to US national interests. Whether Trump wins a second term in the forthcoming election, or Joe Biden scores a victory, America's Africa policy needs a reset.

In his Africa engagement, President Trump has mostly opted for continuity. His administration has continued to engage with Africa through major US policy



initiatives such as the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), the US-Africa Leaders' Summit, the US International Development Finance Corporation (DFC), and the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA). Trump has left the AGOA intact, under which sub-Saharan African products enter the United States free of duty, despite abandoning two other "unfair" trade agreements such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership and the North American Free Trade Agreement. Trump has also launched his own signature trade and investment initiative, *Prosper Africa*, which aims to facilitate private US investment. Although Trump has personally not been invested in Africa, his administration has remained diplomatically engaged with the continent. His appointments for Africa, most notably Tibor Nagy, assistant secretary of state for African affairs from July 2018 and Mark Green, who served as USAID administrator till April 2020, have largely been free of controversy.

Despite these developments, the US' current policy framework requires serious scrutiny to validate what works and discard what is no longer effective. President Trump has yet to build rapport with most African leaders; indeed, no other US president since John F. Kennedy has met with fewer African leaders while sitting in the Oval office. Compounding the scenario are certain derogatory remarks from senior US officials, travel bans, and proposed budget cuts which have been deplored by African leaders and publics as neglectful and insensitive.

President Trump's decision to withdraw from the Paris agreement on climate change, and his intention to withdraw from and defund the World Health Organization—equally bode ill for a continent with fragile public health infrastructure. Furthermore, recent proposals from the US Department of Homeland Security to revamp student visa rules, if implemented, will disproportionately affect students from 36 African countries and dissuade them from choosing education in the US. This will not only cost the US economy but will benefit global competitors like China. After all, China, along with the US, attract the most number of African students. If the US implements the new visa rule, China will become the alternative destination for African students.

Terrorism and violent crimes across Africa continue to pose significant threats to US national security interests; they put American lives at risk and drain vital resources. Currently, the US has some 7,000 military personnel on rotational deployment across the African continent. The United States Africa Command (AFRICOM) consists of a constellation of more than two dozen outposts, and reportedly has 29 bases in 15 African countries, mostly concentrated in Sahelian states and Horn of Africa. However, President Trump's administration is considering cutting several hundred troops in West Africa and leaving a base in Niger to redirect resources towards China and Russia. Such a move will be counterproductive and will likely result in a

surge in violent extremist attacks on the continent and would be misunderstood by Africans. Despite US pessimism over increasing Chinese military engagement in Africa, the move to abruptly pull American forces out of the continent is harmfully short-sighted. It will be a losing proposition that will push African countries closer to Beijing. Instead of simply aiming to counter China's engagement, African countries would rather have the US compete in areas of capacity building, trade, and investment—areas that will undoubtedly bring in greater benefits to their development goals.

# The Americas: Trump Was Not Just Another Brick in the ‘Wall’

ANANT SINGH MANN



*Getty Images*

**T**he Trump administration's policy towards the Latin American and Caribbean Countries (LAC) was underlined by issues of immigration and drug trafficking, and support for human rights, democracy and trade—not very different from policies of his predecessors. Indeed, the US has a history of partnership with the LAC countries in arresting the drug problem. The various frameworks that have been created in the past include Plan Colombia in 2000, Mérida Initiative in Mexico (2007), the Central American Regional Security Initiative (2008), and the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative (2009). Since 2018, Trump's administration has reaffirmed its commitment to the LAC countries in promoting human rights, the rule of law, and democracy. It has sanctioned, for instance, authoritarian regimes like those in Venezuela, Cuba and Nicaragua.

At the same time, Trump's focus on controlling immigration from the LAC has led to contentious changes in American policy towards the region. For one, the US has curtailed foreign aid to Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras, as a penalty for failing to curb the outflow of migrants to the US. Additionally, Trump has increased taxes on remittances, and implemented controversial Asylum Cooperation Agreements and 'Safe Third Country Agreements' to share the burden of immigrants. Trump's tough stance on immigration has also put the US-Mexico relationship on a tight-rope several times throughout his presidency. Fortunately for Trump, Mexico has agreed to provide immigrants with year-long humanitarian visas, allowing them to remain in Mexico.

Protectionism was a cornerstone in US policy in its backyard during Trump's presidency. Most countries accepted these protectionist policies, albeit hesitantly, due to the US' sheer size, geographic proximity, and trade potential. Consequently, the US' withdrawal from the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) signed in 1994 with Mexico and Canada—and its replacement with the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA)—sheds light on the Trump administration's bullish economic manoeuvring in its immediate neighbourhood. Following the signing of the USMCA, the Trump administration continued to test its relationship with Canada with the imposition of fresh tariffs on its aluminium and steel. To be sure, such strain in US-Canada relationship is not entirely new; it has various historical antecedents, amongst them, Canada's refusal to take part in the Iraq War in 2003, as well as disputes over US duties imposed on Canadian softwood lumber exports.

These trends indicate that although Trump's four years in office have largely not deviated from the historical elements of US policy towards the LAC, they have accentuated specific policy areas. In hindsight, it appears that an underlined pragmatism has been the most significant change in the overall continuity of US foreign policy in the region.

# Multilateralism: Ground Zero of American Retreat

AARSHI TIRKEY



A chain of global and domestic developments—beginning with the 2008 global financial crisis—resulted in a loss of faith in multilateralism and a resurgence in nationalist sentiments. As such, President Donald Trump’s election in 2016 paved the way for a bold, unapologetic approach to US foreign policy and trade—termed as ‘America First’. The rhetoric would soon launch a US retreat from multilateralism: it withdrew from international agreements, posed obstructions to the functioning of multilateral organisations, slashed financial aid, and even severed ties with international bodies. Some of Trump’s actions are connected to the core demands of his supporters (such as job losses), as well as the historical stand of American foreign policy (for instance, Israel). Nonetheless, Trump’s methods to achieve these objectives were still deemed to be arbitrary, shocking, and therefore, disruptive.



Early on, the Trump administration withdrew from the 2016 Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement and replaced the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) with a new deal—in a bid to reduce US trade deficit and job losses. In 2017, the US withdrew from the UNESCO, opposing the anti-Israel resolutions passed by the organisation. This was followed by Washington's 2018 withdrawal from the UN Human Rights Council because of its alleged failure to do its job. The Trump administration has also obstructed the functioning of the WTO dispute settlement system, and recently announced its veto against appointing Nigeria's Dr. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala as the new WTO Director General—a candidate who is supported by most member states.

Around 2017, Washington also announced its withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, stating that its terms were unfair to the US. The global community criticised this development, since the agreement is regarded as a landmark achievement in efforts to strengthen global climate action. The Trump administration's decisions have also jeopardised treaty mechanisms for nuclear arms control. Washington's withdrawal from the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty and its ambiguous position on the New START treaty, could permanently set back efforts towards non-proliferation and arms control.

The biggest damage, however, may yet be in the form of funding cuts by the US towards international organisations. These organisations are reliant on funding to function effectively—and so far, the US continues to be their highest contributor. Halting funding can affect the operations of international organisations, lead to a downsizing of their staff, and cause lasting damage to their authority, reputation and legitimacy. The US has ceased all funding to the UN Population Fund, and the UNRWA—which does relief work for Palestine refugees. In 2020, the US also announced that it would no longer fund the World Health Organization (WHO) and withdraw its membership, because of WHO's alleged mismanagement of the COVID-19 pandemic and the body's ties to China.

Though certain issues persist in the functioning of multilateral organisations, it is important to recognise their utility; after all, they provide the sole platform for building international cooperation on global issues. Trump's policies signify a US retreat from the post-WWII institutional architecture and global governance framework. Strengthening global governance has never been a priority for the Trump administration, as seen in his disdain towards these mechanisms. As a leadership vacuum becomes imminent, a disruption—such as this—will weaken international organisations and diminish the importance of multilateralism as a foreign policy goal for countries across the world.

# Geo-Economics: The Art of Trumpnomics

ABHIJIT MUKHOPADHYAY



*Getty Images*

President Trump undertook economic policies in his first term that did not deviate significantly from his predecessors. The emphasis has been on monetary policy, including fixing interest rates at near-zero levels and supplying adequate credit to keep the economy running.

As the COVID-19 pandemic hit the country hard, a US\$2-trillion fiscal stimulus package was signed into law on 27 March 2020. The package enjoyed overwhelming bipartisan support. Such fiscal stimulus, however, is more of an aberration than a continuation, as subsequently proven by Trump's withdrawal from negotiations for a second stimulus package in early October 2020. He ruled out any discussion till the November elections are over.

What perhaps sets Trump apart from any other American president in history is his trade policy, seamlessly dovetailed with his “America First” rhetoric. Trump has accused his political opponents of undermining and compromising American interest in the trade deals that the US inked in the past. He declared himself as “Tariff Man” and exhorted that “trade wars are good and easy to win.” Thus, the American trade war began with the imposition of US\$360 billion in tariffs on Chinese goods. It did not stop with China.

What followed were the renegotiation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), involving long-term allies Canada and Mexico, and the imposition of tariffs on European Union (EU) partners and other countries, including India. The Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade deal that excludes China, painstakingly negotiated by the Obama administration, was summarily dumped. Soon enough, the “free trade” era led by the US itself was replaced by “America First” protectionism.

If economic history teaches anything, however, it is that trade victories are not only extremely difficult to achieve—they inevitably inflict collateral damage. The worsening US trade deficit numbers, even before the pandemic, reaffirms this lesson of history.

The US’ aggressive, hostile stance against China — nurtured under Trump — is likely to survive irrespective of the outcome of the November polls. There is a near consensus within the American polity that China has been violating international trade laws and conventions, engages in predatory trade practices, and behaves like a schoolyard bully in its relations with other nations. Although critical of tariffs, Joe Biden is yet to clearly voice his opinion on the withdrawal of US tariffs on China. The US-China trade relations would never be the same again — and this is arguably the most important legacy of Donald Trump.

The second is the collapse of global multilateral trade. Apart from the trade wars, the Trump administration’s refusal to appoint members in the Appellate Body of the WTO (World Trade Organization)—thereby rendering the body virtually defunct—bear testimony. Multilateralism in trade is practically in a coma.

More than seven decades of American leadership propelled free international trade and allied global organisations. Under Trump, the US relinquished that global leadership. China will continue making desperate attempts to fill the void. Even a Biden win may find it extremely difficult to recapture that leadership mantle. An uncertain world where bilateralism and plurilateralism are likely to replace multilateralism, therefore, will be another enduring leftover of the Trump presidency.

# Geo-technology: 5G and Who Builds the Digital Future, Builds All of the Future

GAUTAM CHIKERMANE



*Getty Images*

Geopolitics is being powered by a new actor — geo-technology. If everything around us, from technology and information to business and society, has been disrupted into a shapeless, amorphous mass of constant data streams, politics cannot and will not remain protected from, or isolated by, these broader societal trends. When algorithms can figure out people's deepest desires for goods, services and information, it would be fallacious to presume that they will not intrude into international politics through the aspirations of the voters and the voted.

Yet any attempt at making sense of these changes around a fulcrum called Donald Trump will remain limited unless the entire multi-headed Hydra underlying this constantly disrupting information mass is revealed. Under Xi Jinping, authoritarian China is able to use the disruptive nature of geo-technologies to encroach into the communication networks of democracies and turn every Chinese entity into a spy

to capture and use information against them. At some point, the democratic recoil will show up. That point is today, through the steadily rising consensus on the need to ban China's Huawei in telecommunications across the world.

If the 20<sup>th</sup> century gave the world the Great Depression, the 21<sup>st</sup> century is offering a Great Disruption. Regardless of whether Trump wins or loses in November 2020, the Great Disruption is here to stay. Indeed, "Trump" itself is an idea: if he loses, the stream of consciousness of US citizens will only create another disrupter, or else force the incumbent to continue with a modified version of his disruption. Lost in the stream of this apparent disorder—or say, at the cusp of a change in political-societal transformation—is the quaint past comprising thought control, idea monopolies, and the entire infrastructure of media, academia and narratives that has served it and benefited from it. Technology is bringing information directly from sources to seekers. In fact, when platforms like Twitter or Facebook, shaping the 21<sup>st</sup> century but grounded in the 19<sup>th</sup>, behave like thought-control vehicles of the past, they are taken to task.

Likewise, gone is the need for policy to pass through the liberal lens. In the information war between the most powerful democracy and the most powerful authoritarian regime, Trump has disrupted the narrative of allowances made to Xi. The China under the control of the Chinese Communist Party, itself inferior to Emperor Xi, is no longer getting the long rope the Party has been used to for the past three decades. If Xi is attempting to weaponise Huawei, the response is the geo-technological defence Trump has unleashed by enforcing a ban on the company in 5G rollouts of 13 European countries in the past few months. In the coming months, this geo-technological theatre of great powers will shift its eyes from Europe to Asia, and the wave of disruption will travel with it.





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