

US president-elect Donald Trump is to be sworn into office tomorrow after one of the most uncertain US presidential transitions in the post-war period. US foreign and trade policy could be entering a period of change as significant as any since the beginning of the Cold War, when then-US president Harry Truman helped build a consensus around US global international leadership.

Trump wants “a new foreign-policy direction” and his stance on Russia and China in his first 100 days could be key leading indicators of the degree of transformation on the horizon.

It is already clear that he will challenge key elements of post-war orthodoxy pursued, in different ways, by Democratic and Republican presidents based around US global dominance and commitment to expanding the liberal democratic order, including US-led alliances.

Specifically, with Trump’s commitment to putting “America first,” he is rhetorically committed to more combative relations with China; greater burden sharing with traditional military allies, including Japan and Europe; reviewing or scrapping trade deals, including the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA); potential withdraw from the Paris Agreement — agreed to by more than 170 countries as a replacement for the Kyoto Protocol; the possibility of ending the Iranian nuclear agreement; and the prospect of pursuing rapprochement with Russia.

Yet, one reason the transition to the Trump presidency has been so uncertain is contrasting views of his incoming Cabinet.

For instance, US secretary of defence-designate James Mattis last week said that “Russia is raising grave concerns on several fronts,” including trying to “break the Northern Atlantic alliance [NATO],” and that Washington should keep the nuclear deal with Iran.

Meanwhile, US secretary of state-designate Rex Tillerson was forceful in his criticism of Russia and he indicated his support for free-trade agreements.

## Trump-China: The first 100 days

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The balance of probability is that while Trump's campaign rhetoric will be watered down in some areas, his instincts will powerfully shape the contours of the new team's policies.

He knows that there is a sizeable body of US public opinion that supports him, with one Pew Research Center poll in April last year finding that about 60 percent of people believe that the US "should deal with its own [domestic] problems and let others deal with theirs the best they can."

In his first 100 days, a key area to watch will be policy toward other "great powers," especially China and Russia. Already, it is clear that Beijing could become the bete noire of the new administration and underlying Trump's hawkish sentiment is a conviction that the country represents the primary threat to US interests globally.

Yet, he has also acknowledged that China can also play a potentially constructive role in key areas, such as North Korea's continuing provocations.

In this context, Trump asserted last week that "everything is under negotiation" with Beijing and it appears that he might ultimately be looking for a "grand bargain."

He has already begun to shake-up the bilateral "status quo" following his telephone call last month with President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文). This is believed to be the first such communication between a Taiwanese president and a US president or president-elect since the 1970s and a breach of the so-called "one China" policy, according to which Washington agreed to withdraw diplomatic recognition of Taiwan as part of a deal to secure ties with China.

China policy appears one area where Trump is relatively aligned with his Cabinet.

For instance, Tillerson last week said that Beijing would "not be allowed access" to its new, artificial islands in the South China Sea, and Mattis slammed the country's behavior in the area, with China's moves unsettling US allies.

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Any “grand bargain” with China would need to extend beyond the security arena to economics too. Here, one specific measure Trump wants to see is Beijing floating the yuan.

He asserts that the country is “manipulating” its currency by keeping its exchange rate artificially low to secure an exports advantage.

However, it is US policy to Russia that has potential to be most controversial — with Congress already looking into allegations of the Trump’s ties with Moscow. While he might tread carefully in his first few weeks, his team has already been in “very frequent” contact with the Russian ambassador to the US — and is seeking a relatively early meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Trump believes Russia is not a serious threat to the US and that there is scope for rapprochement, hinting last week that he could drop economic sanctions if the country “is helpful.”

Specifically, he perceives there are common interests over issues such as preventing Iran securing nuclear weapons, combating terrorism and potentially even helping contain China in a new global balance of power.

One key area in which Trump will be most keenly watched internationally will be how any warming ties with Moscow might affect NATO.

He has described the military alliance as “obsolete,” sending chills down the spines of states in Eastern Europe, yet Mattis last week argued that NATO has relevance “as the most successful military alliance in modern world history, maybe ever.”

Already, uncertainty over Trump’s NATO policy is spurring Europeans to seek to reverse about a decade of defense spending cuts, with a European Defense Action Plan discussed last month that would see greater continental military cooperation.

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Trump's stance toward Russia and China could be key leading indicators of the degree to which US foreign and trade policy is now entering a period of change. While his campaign rhetoric will be watered down in some areas, a significant recasting could nonetheless be on the horizon.

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