

Power play points to tensions ahead

Written by Andrew Hammond
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China warned US President Donald Trump's administration on Saturday not to destabilize East Asia after US Secretary of Defense James Mattis said in Japan that the Senkaku Islands — also known as the Diaoyutai Islands (釣台) — claimed by Taiwan, Japan and China, were covered by a US-Japan military mutual-defence accord.

Mattis accused China of “shredding the trust” of its neighbors and his remarks build on those last month by US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson that Beijing should “not be allowed access” to its new, artificial islands in the South China Sea.

After a frenzied first two weeks in office, it is increasingly clear that Trump wants “a new foreign policy direction,” perhaps the biggest shake-up since 1945. His policies toward other great powers, including China and Russia, in his first 100 days could be key indicators of the degree of transformation on the horizon.

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

Trump has already, controversially, scrapped US involvement in the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), placed new sanctions on Iran and put it “on notice,” and introduced a temporary immigration ban on seven Muslim-majority countries.

And with his commitment to putting “America first,” he is also rhetorically committed to more combative relations with China; greater burden sharing with traditional military allies including Europe; reviewing the North America Free Trade Agreement; potential withdraw from the Paris Agreement — agreed by more than 170 countries to replace the Kyoto Protocol; while at the same time holding on to the prospect of better relations with Russia.

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

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Mattis last month said that “Russia is raising grave concerns on several fronts,” and that Washington should keep its nuclear deal with Iran.

Meanwhile, Tillerson criticized Russia, indicated his support for free-trade agreements, such as the TPP, and supports the Paris Agreement.

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 sizable body of US public opinion that supports him.

A Pew Research Center poll in April last year said that about 60 percent of Americans 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 China and Russia. Trump’s stance toward Russia has the potential to be most the controversial — with the US Congress already looking into allegations surrounding his ties to Moscow. And it is believed Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin are seeking a meeting following their first phone call on Jan. 28.

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

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

One key area Trump will be most keenly watched, internationally, will be how any warming ties with Moscow may impact NATO.

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

Already, uncertainty over Trump’s NATO policy is spurring Europeans to reverse about a decade of defense spending cuts, totaling about 10 percent in real terms.

To this end, a new European Defence Action Plan was discussed at the EU summit in December last year, subject to final agreement, would see greater continental military cooperation too.

In contrast to Russia, it is already clear that Beijing could become a bete noire of the new administration and underlying Trump’s hawkish sentiment is a conviction that China 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 last month asserted 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 with President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) in December last year.

This is believed to be the first such communication between US and Taiwanese presidents or president-elects since the 1970s and a breach of the “one China” protocol under which Washington agreed to withdraw diplomatic recognition of Taiwan as part of a deal to open up relations with China.

China policy appears one area where Trump is relatively aligned with his Cabinet. Both Mattis and Tillerson have slammed Beijing’s behavior, which has unsettled US allies, including Japan

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and South Korea.

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 export advantage.

Taken overall, Trump’s stance toward Russia and China could be an indicator 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.

Andrew Hammond is an Associate at LSE IDEAS (the Centre for International Affairs, Diplomacy and Strategy) at the London School of Economics.

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