

IRSEM - International conference

A Power in Transition?

Trump's America and US Strategic Challenges for 2020

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The 2016 US presidential election revealed the unprecedented divisions within American society. The campaign exacerbated the culture wars that emerged in the 1990s and the polarization between the East and West coasts and Middle America, between urban and rural America, between the industrial working class and the globalized elite, between liberals and conservatives, and also between proponents of multiculturalism and nationalists, between advocates of free trade and those of protectionism. These are fault lines which, to a large extent, have run through the Trump Administration's first two years in power. Within days of the 2018 midterm elections, this international conference aims to take stock of President Trump's actions and their impacts on US foreign policy and power. Two years after his election, how has Trump's disruptive agenda been implemented both at home and abroad? Has it altered the United States' relationship with the world or accelerated the American transition of power?

The "House Divided" and the Influence of Domestic Determinants

The conference intends to examine the various domestic determining factors, be they governmental institutions (Congress, the federal judiciary, departments, agencies...) or nongovernmental actors (think tanks, lobbies, NGOs, public opinion, the media). Between Congress, the Pentagon and Donald Trump, who will determine foreign policy for the remainder of his term? What positions do the House and Senate foreign relations and military affairs committees assume? After undermining Trump's travel ban in the first weeks of his presidency, will federal judges continue to serve as a kind of check on executive power? Likewise, what degree of inertia has the bureaucratic apparatus exerted? Has it constituted a proper check – passive or active – on presidential decisions? How are the Democratic and Republican Parties managing after the quasi-insurgencies of the 2016 primaries? Where will they stand in the 2018 midterm and 2020 presidential elections? What do the initially hostile conservative think tanks (Heritage, AEI, Hudson...) and press (*Commentary*, *The Weekly Standard*...) write about Trump's first two years in the White House? Within the executive branch, which "adults in the room" get to influence decision-making? What influence does Vice-President Pence wield?

Trump the Retrencher? Realignments, Strategic Retrenchment and Hard Power Muscle

Since his accession to power, Trump has significantly softened his stance on important issues. He has committed the US to honoring NATO's Article 5, which he had questioned during the campaign. Likewise, he has reaffirmed the United States' commitment to defending Japan and South Korea against Pyongyang's nuclear threat—but has since begun negotiating with Kim Jong-un. In the Middle East, as in Afghanistan, Trump has maintained—and even increased—US involvement.

Overall, however, Trump has delivered on his promises to break with past policies and attitudes. And this break has, for the most part, revealed a policy of retrenchment that has limited the United States' field of action abroad. The "new generation" free trade agreements such as the TPP and the TTIP, along with NAFTA, were meant to make the US the focal point of international trade and the main norm setter, especially in Asia, thereby both cushioning Washington's relative economic decline and isolating Beijing. Besides breaking away from a decades-long tradition of promoting free trade, Trump's unilateral retreat has given China more freedom to maneuver in Asia. In keeping with his "America First" campaign slogan, Trump's foreign policy has been mainly defined by nationalism and unilateralism, as exemplified by Washington's withdrawal from UNESCO, from the Paris Agreement on climate change, from the Iranian nuclear deal, and by the decision to move the US embassy in Israel to Jerusalem. Meanwhile, the US president has shown complacency towards Washington's most challenging adversaries, such as Putin and Xi.

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US diplomatic tools have been severely damaged by drastic budget cuts, by a lack of agents both in Washington and in the field and by the open conflict between Rex Tillerson and Donald Trump, which has created diplomatic chaos. Thus, the Department of Defense seems to prevail once again over the Department of State indicating that hard power is back. In particular, the desire to end aid and development programs signifies the end of the benign hegemon strategy that had given us hope that the US would use *smart power* and *light footprint* strategies.

In the shadow wars - secret wars and counter-terrorism - the White House seems to make a worrying break with the previous administrations (Obama and Bush). President Trump wants to act faster and break with the legal and collective decision-making framework of his predecessor. Trump has hastily authorized special operations (such as in Yemen in January 2017) by simplifying the chain of command. The number of drone bombings has increased dramatically, especially in Yemen and Somalia, causing many more civilian fatalities. The US is limiting transparency in military interventions (especially those by Special Forces and the CIA), breaking with the legal framework and the practice of civilian control over military action and favoring bilateral alliances in counter-terrorism. This has led to foreign operations that are not part of a defined strategic vision. It appears that the Trump Administration is making a 180 degree turn, with many serious consequences for long-term US national interests.

Given the evolutions in the strategic environment, the focus will be on: 1) the future of transatlantic relations and relations with NATO; the evolution of US-Polish relations in the context of the European reassurance; Ankara-Washington relations and the Kurdish question in a post-ISIS context and after the rapprochement between Ankara and Moscow. 2) Is there a post-pivot US strategy in Asia? What is the future of US-Chinese interdependence? 3) What evolutions have there been for the light footprint strategy and the American Way of War in Africa? 4) More generally, how should we respond to the reemergence of Russian in Europe? How about the Washington-Riyadh axis in light of the Moscow-Tehran axis? Finally, how should we envision American power on new battlefields - in cyber and information warfare that are part of the game of power politics of the 21st century? When traditional US allies have become aware that "Trumpism will survive Trump," the different scenarios suggested by European, Canadian and American experts and academics will try to put in perspective the future of American power by 2020.