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*José Luis Pontijas Calderón*

New Administration: new foreign  
policy for United States?

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## *New Administration: new foreign policy for United States?*

### *Abstract:*

There is currently an intense debate about what US foreign policy could look like, if the presidential elections give victory to the Democratic candidate. The priority to China, which enjoys the consensus between Republicans and Democrats, is not the only matter where there are coincidences and parallels. Thus, given the current international scenario and the internal US situation, we might wonder if Washington would carry out a foreign policy radically different from that practiced by the current administration. The present analysis seeks to answer this question.

### *Keywords:*

United States, Washington, China, Russia, European Union, strategy, allied, retrenchment

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## Nueva Administración ¿Nueva política exterior para Estados Unidos?

### Resumen:

Actualmente existe un intenso debate sobre cómo podría ser la política exterior de EEUU, caso de que las elecciones presidenciales otorguen la victoria al candidato demócrata. La prioridad hacia China, que goza del consenso entre republicanos y demócratas, no es el único asunto en el que existen coincidencias y paralelismos. Ante el actual escenario internacional y la situación interna estadounidense, cabría preguntarse si Washington llevaría a cabo una política exterior radicalmente distinta a la practicada por la actual administración. En el presente análisis se pretende responder a dicha cuestión.

### Palabras clave:

Estados Unidos, Washington, China, Rusia, Unión Europea, estrategia, aliados, aislacionismo

## Introduction

It is generally accepted that President Trump's presidency, with its accentuated personalism, has increased uncertainty with regards to US foreign policy. But although there is no shortage of analysts who describe this foreign policy as erratic<sup>1</sup>, a more detailed analysis shows that it is the result of a vision and a practice that would move according to determined and therefore, to a certain extent predictable parameters.

Many European politicians and analysts are hoping for a change in the White House that would return US foreign policy to the status quo before the arrival of Donald Trump, but by studying the structural factors, both external and internal, that determine it, we might ask whether the changes might not be as radical as expected<sup>2</sup>.

## Trump: a new foreign policy vision

To understand President Trump's foreign policy we must visualise three of his key concerns: the importance of national sovereignty, mistrust of international organisations and the desire to dismantle Obama's legacy. This explains the attacks on the international community and its institutions, as well as the search for new bilateral agreements that can be sold as victories to his electorate (which could be considered as his public) and the rest of the American population.

We can also identify a number of ideas that underlie his position statements that suggest a particular view of global affairs: the idea that the allies are taking advantage of the United States, a certain fascination with charismatic authoritarian leaders who wield unbridled power, and his concern to instil respect<sup>3</sup> for his country. Thus, part of his foreign policy would be guided by the fixed idea that his predecessors in the White

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<sup>1</sup> Zakaria, Fared; *Trump does not have a foreign policy, he has a series of impulses*, The Washington Post, 10 January 2020, available at [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/trump-does-not-have-a-foreign-policy-he-has-a-series-of-impulses/2020/01/09/03ae5592-3329-11ea-a053-dc6d944ba776\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/trump-does-not-have-a-foreign-policy-he-has-a-series-of-impulses/2020/01/09/03ae5592-3329-11ea-a053-dc6d944ba776_story.html), accessed on 25 August 2020.

<sup>2</sup> DACOBA CERVIÑO, Francisco J. *When the storm passes... calm will still not be restored*. IEEE Analysis Paper 25/2020. [http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs\\_analisis/2020/DIEEEA25\\_2020FRADAC\\_finales2020.pdf](http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2020/DIEEEA25_2020FRADAC_finales2020.pdf) accessed on 10 September 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Wolf, Robert; *Donald Trump's status driven foreign policy*, *Survival*, vol. 59, no. 5 of 2017, pages 99-117.

House let partners, allies and adversaries, take advantage of American good intentions and disrespect him. Criticism of NATO, including the threat of possible abandonment, would follow this line. Although Washington's demands towards the Atlantic Alliance predate Trump, his personal political style would have contributed to the deterioration of the transatlantic link, sowing uncertainty and outlining lines of fracture within it. On the other hand, his nationalist unilateralism would have a very solid background in the *Jacksonian* school, clearly isolationist and strongly rooted in American thought.

These elements would explain his apparently contradictory foreign policy, since his *Jacksonian* isolationist instincts (his desire to put an end to military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, his aversion to getting involved in Syria and Libya, his desire to free himself from the conditioning of agreements and treaties, etc.) contradict other interventionist decisions (the bombing of Syrian forces in April 2017 and 2018). Far from defending an order of liberal values, which he believes would have harmed the US, he would try to ensure economic and military superiority over his adversaries<sup>4</sup>. Evidently, all this is accompanied by a clearly populist policy, truffled with a certain anti-elite phobia, which, rejecting the socio-economic status quo, rejects by extension everything related to agreements and submission to international organisations.

In this way, *Trumpism* would be both the product and the inspiration of profound evolutions, many of which were already present before his arrival in power, where external and internal factors overlap. The social and economic wear and tear generated by the fiascos in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the concern about immigration, were already present before his arrival. He simply used them in his campaign and they have guided his presidential decisions. Let us remember that immigration policy has had an impact on relations with Mexico and Canada, an example of the interrelationship between internal and external affairs.

Another feature of President Trump's foreign policy would be his obsession with differentiating himself from Obama and erasing his legacy. This would explain the withdrawal of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), the Paris agreement on climate change, the nuclear agreement with Iran, and the revision of the policy of rapprochement with Cuba. In his vision, economic, diplomatic and military affairs would

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<sup>4</sup> Quencez, Martin; *Le trumpisme en politique étrangère: vision et pratique*, 8 June 2020, available at <https://www.ifri.org/fr/publications/politique-etrangere/articles-de-politique-etrangere/trumpisme-politique-etrangere>, accessed on 25 August 2020.

form a whole that must be negotiated as a whole at the bilateral level, in which the enormous American weight would ensure success.

But apart from the clear influence that the personality of the current occupant of the White House has on foreign policy, we cannot disregard the powerful structural elements that drive and determine US foreign policy. In fact, some people consider that the main lines of Washington's great strategy have not changed: guaranteeing its national security, maintaining its economic well-being and the interests that guarantee and shape its system of life<sup>5</sup>.

### **The external and internal structural elements**

When mentioning such elements, perhaps we should start by citing the US national interests, in which Obama and Trump closely coincide and are clearly defined in the various published strategies. Another very important element is the priority given to competition with China, which the Obama administration has already promoted with the announced shift to the Asia-Pacific region. The same would have happened with the desire to end the role of gendarme in the world, which, along with the loss of appetite for the use of force on a significant scale, is widely shared by Democrats, Republicans and public opinion. In addition, there is the confrontation with Russia, which is spreading beyond the European scenario to other geostrategic areas. Thus, managing the confrontation with China and Russia (powers that continue to evolve and adjust their geopolitical decisions) will most likely continue to require Washington to redefine the terms of its relationship with, and the efforts of, its partners and allies at the regional and global level, which would in turn shape NATO and the European Union.

One such constraint would be burden sharing between the Atlantic allies, something that goes back several decades. While a US withdrawal from Europe is highly unlikely, because of bipartisan opposition to it in the Senate and Congress, the desire to reduce military deployments abroad, a greater effort by Europeans in their defence, and attitudes towards European strategic autonomy (a mixture of scepticism towards its capabilities and concern about its possible impact on US industry) are well established

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<sup>5</sup> Ayuela Azcárate, Fco Javier; Notes on the United States' grand strategy; June 2020, available at <https://global-strategy.org/apuntes-sobre-la-gran-estrategia-de-estados-unidos/>, accessed on 25 August 2020

among politicians and public opinion on the other side of the Atlantic, and would hardly fade under a Democratic administration.

We shouldn't forget the home front. The populist wave that helped to bring Donald Trump to power was the result of a combination of feelings of disgust deeply rooted in a substantial part of American society, which considers itself abandoned by traditional politics. Fukuyama<sup>6</sup> has defined it as a revolt against the elites and the projects coming from them, including economic agreements and alliances. The COVID-19 crisis would be accentuating the growing unease of the American population and there are more and more voices calling for greater national resources to meet domestic social demand. The political and socio-economic trends that brought Donald Trump to power, which were not circumstantial coincidences, are likely to continue to affect his successors. This would intensify competition for public resources, which could reduce the resources available to meet external obligations<sup>7</sup>.

Likewise, while a new administration could diminish the protectionist agenda, the tense domestic social situation would still require some attention. If we remember that the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) was already being criticised by both sides of the Atlantic before Trump's arrival and that Hillary Clinton herself openly criticised the TPP during the election campaign, we might conclude that a Democratic administration could opt for an economic agenda with protectionist overtones. In fact, this summer the Democratic platform issued a draft of the policy it would like to develop if it were to come into power, in which it recognises the relationship between foreign policy and the domestic economy, showing greater sensitivity to the social consequences of globalism and free trade. So a new Democratic administration may not simply be a return to the benign status quo enjoyed by transatlantic and international relations prior to Trump's arrival in 2016<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Fukuyama, Francis; *The pandemic and political order*, available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2020-06-09/pandemic-and-political-order>, accessed on 25 August 2020

<sup>7</sup> Libby, Lewis; To confront China After Coronavirus, We must see the bigger picture; Hudson Institute, 29 April 2020, available at <https://www.hudson.org/research/15983-to-confront-china-after-coronavirus-we-must-see-the-bigger-picture>, accessed on 25 August 2020.

<sup>8</sup> WINTOUR, Patrick; Why a Biden presidency might not mean a return to pre-Trump foreign relations;

In fact, among US politicians and analysts of both political tendencies, voices are beginning to abound calling for a return to US global isolation and the practice of restraint in the use of the military tool.

### **The new trend: the strategy of entrenchment and containment**

This trend calls for the withdrawal of a large part of the forces deployed throughout the world, substantially reducing security and defence commitments and avoiding engaging in war, except when vital interests are directly threatened. Thus, military deployments, alliances and commitments in Europe and Asia should be reduced. This would prevent decline by overstretching and lessen anti-American resentment.

Neo-realistic Republicans believe that the US would be safer in a more dangerous world, as regional rivals would neutralise each other, convinced of Washington's ability to control the consequences and prevent crises from escalating into armed conflict. For their part, the neoliberal Democrats, who also defend the strategy of isolation, do so for opposite reasons, believing that American alliances feed and increase strategic competition.

But while both positions coincide in a global retreat, one might think that regional or global ambitions might not dissipate in the absence of the US. In fact, such a withdrawal could contribute to destabilising some already unstable regional security orders, as some regional powers could be tempted to try their luck with weak neighbours (Russia versus the Baltic states, for example). We could ask ourselves what would happen in those scenarios where the asymmetry of forces would make it advisable for one of the parties to opt for the nuclear option. There could be nuclear proliferation with consequences that are difficult to predict.

On the other hand, the distance from the United States could make it advisable for some of the allied middle powers to seek a rearrangement with one of the other great powers, such as China or Russia, increasing the latter's spheres of influence, to the detriment of the former. This would create a much more complex and unstable world order, since nothing would guarantee that once their regional areas were controlled, the other great powers would not seek to expand further, a scenario of which history shows multiple examples.

It is clear that Washington needs a strategy that responds to the tectonic changes that are taking place in the world order, that successfully manages the change from a strategy based on the fight against terrorism and the stabilisation of the Middle East, to one that responds to the competition between great powers, with China as the main, but not the only, adversary and the necessary cooperation required in transversal matters of global scope. All this has already been outlined in the 2017 national security strategy, but it is increasingly clear that it would require the contribution of partners and allies, some even advocating the implementation of a global alliance of democracies.

### **The seductive idea of the alliance of democracies**

One of the ideas considered, both in Republican and Democratic environments, is to lead an alliance of democracies. In the case of the Republicans, worried about isolating China and in the case of the Democrats to regain the global leadership given by the current administration. But while the idea may seem very appealing, it could backfire<sup>9</sup>. First of all, it could create a new line of fracture in the international scenario, which would make cooperation even more difficult on issues where the participation of all (at least the largest) is essential: climate change, terrorism, international organised crime, refugees, nuclear proliferation, arms trafficking, massive migrations, pandemics, ... Could progress be made on these or other issues without the cooperation of China or Russia?

There would also be the thorny question of whether or not to include countries in the alleged alliance, because at present there are states that are slipping from a clearly democratic position into another in which their situation is not so clear. What standards would be set for admitting or not admitting partners to such an alliance? How would those who considered themselves suitable react, whether they were rejected or not?

On the other hand, shared values would not guarantee the alignment of all members' interests, let alone ensure that all democracies in the world were willing to be led by the

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<sup>9</sup> Aaron David Miller and Richard Sokolsky; Washington Post ,13 August 2020; available at [https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2020/08/13/biden-pompeo-trump-democracy/?utm\\_source=ctw&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=buttonlink&mkt\\_tok=eyJpIjoiTVdJeU9XVTFaR05oWXpFMSIsInQiOiJkN1dZdmVYZUpoWTVhS2ZYWm90OVgxSUxudlwvkc2XC8xXC9pZVRuWDVwUjJlbzdBT24rVVZpSDBcL2VsakJCMWgwzbVvUzczCtneVhEaHpBeDQ4WXk2ek4xRIQ3ZUhxS2VKb3ZEeXloNFI5ckNxQXJRa012NjRNR25XWG1YbGhodjAifQ%3D%3D](https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2020/08/13/biden-pompeo-trump-democracy/?utm_source=ctw&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=buttonlink&mkt_tok=eyJpIjoiTVdJeU9XVTFaR05oWXpFMSIsInQiOiJkN1dZdmVYZUpoWTVhS2ZYWm90OVgxSUxudlwvkc2XC8xXC9pZVRuWDVwUjJlbzdBT24rVVZpSDBcL2VsakJCMWgwzbVvUzczCtneVhEaHpBeDQ4WXk2ek4xRIQ3ZUhxS2VKb3ZEeXloNFI5ckNxQXJRa012NjRNR25XWG1YbGhodjAifQ%3D%3D)



United States. Examples of disagreements, confrontations and even wars between democracies (the 1898 war between Cuba and the Philippines between Spain and the United States is a clear example), although infrequent, do occur. The latest example of how difficult it is to align points of view, even among very close allies, was provided by the vote in the UN Security Council on 14 August<sup>10</sup>. The resolution that Washington tried to push through to extend sanctions against Iran for its nuclear programme resulted in a resounding failure: only two votes in favour (US and Dom. Rep.), two against (Russia and China) and eleven abstentions. Among the latter, those in Germany, France and the United Kingdom. Another example would be the current situation between Greece and France, on the one hand, and Turkey, on the other, in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Geography, history, economics, demography and culture play a fundamental role that often leads to calculations of opposing interests, even among very close allies. This is especially true when the equation involves major powers. Do all the countries of the European Union or NATO agree on how relations with Russia or China should be? Obviously not, and the views range from those who see them as an existential threat, to those who would like to open up broad avenues of understanding and cooperation.

The emerging world may be less and less sensitive to Western values (human rights, rule of law, liberal democracy, etc.), now that the unipolar American moment after the Cold War is over. But the liberal order built after the Second World War was aimed less at the triumphal advance of democracy than at the establishment of a pragmatic framework of cooperation that would provide solutions to the dangers arising from the inescapable interrelationship (competition vs. cooperation) between rival great powers. Perhaps the Western countries could begin to consider practising realistic diplomacy that would encourage and enable the resolution of transnational problems that affect everyone, democratic and undemocratic states alike, whether they are adversaries or not. The idea of an alliance of democracies, launched at the time by Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, could be not only ineffective, but counterproductive. Moreover, Washington and its partners and allies seem to be less threatened by rival major powers than by the current emerging, interconnected and consecutive global dangers<sup>11</sup>,

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<sup>10</sup> Information available at <https://ullderechointernacional.blogspot.com/2020/08/reflexiones-sobre-el-consejo-de.html?m=1>, accessed on 19 August 2020.

<sup>11</sup> Ikenberry, G. John, The next Liberal Order, Foreign Policy, July/August 2020.

such as the 2008 financial crisis, the 2020 pandemic or the security implications of climate change.

In view of this, the United States could consider rebuilding a world order based on coexistence with China and Russia, the objective of which would be to avoid war, making cooperation possible whenever possible and taking into account the interests of its partners and allies, especially Europe, India and Japan. The alternative would be to continue along the current path.

## Conclusions

The outcome of the next US elections could substantially change the current style of US diplomacy, but most of the reasons that have led to many of the decisions of the current administration would persist to a greater or lesser degree, as the structural factors that condition it would continue to exert their influence on Washington. In fact, Trump would have kept his promises, in response to such structural factors.

Candidate Biden's rhetoric, should he take up residence in the White House, may be more conciliatory than that of his predecessor, but the need to accentuate the shift towards the Asia-Pacific (we may be witnessing the end of 100 years of focused attention on Europe), would still require redefining his relationship with partners and allies, demanding greater effort in security and defence.

US influence seems to have depended as much on its power as on its ability to provide the international system with initiatives and institutional frameworks that, while clearly benefiting the US, would also benefit many others, democratic or otherwise. Thus, the idea of an alliance of democracies, which could create yet another fault line in the global system, could prove counterproductive and ineffective in responding to problems that require the cooperation of the majority.

On the other hand, the growing attention that American society is demanding, could also condition the foreign agenda of a new administration, given the recognised interdependence between it and the internal economic-social situation.

All of the above seems to indicate that a change in the White House may not mean radical changes in US foreign policy. It would be involved in more conciliatory diplomatic forms and accompanied by a greater emphasis on alliances and partnerships, as well as reducing tension and increasing its leadership in international institutions and bodies.

*José Luis Pontijas Calderón*

Artillery Colonel

PhD in Applied Economics (Univ. Alcalá de Henares)

IEEE Analyst in the Euro-Atlantic Security Area