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Sustainable Security in the Trump Era

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Summary

Despite considerable disarray continuing into its third month, the new US administration is showing more consistent, if not coherent, signs of how it will try to implement Donald Trump's campaign proposals. In large part, these may be assessed as antithetical to a more sustainable security agenda, given that they promote military confrontation, undermine attempts to address climate change, and are, at best, incoherent in their response to economic inequality. Little of this translation to reality is likely to endear Trump to voters or his party. Greater policy turbulence, at home and abroad, should be expected ahead of mid-term elections next year.

Introduction

The Trump administration has been in power for 75 days; following the election campaign and the post-election transition it is now possible to get a reasonably clear picture of how its policies relating to security are taking shape. There has been much speculation that the United States will take a very different path to that of the Obama era, not least in relation to security and climate change, and since the United States is the world's most powerful state it is appropriate to make an initial assessment of the changes as they may affect the sustainable security thinking with which ORG has been concerned for the last decade. Is the Trump era likely to make a major difference to the global security outlook or is it more likely that realities of international relations will limit the capacity for the change Trump seeks?

Sustainable Security

The ORG approach to security may be summarised:

Security challenges such as terrorism, crime and weapons proliferation cannot be successfully contained or controlled without understanding and addressing their root causes. ORG's Sustainable Security concept takes a comprehensive, long-term approach that encompasses climate change, resource scarcity, militarisation, poverty, inequality and marginalisation.

As the thinking has developed it has tended to group the challenges into three main areas, economic relations, climate change, and militarisation, and these are convenient headings with which to make an initial assessment of the Trump era.

The issue of economic relations is seen as having as its greatest challenge the failure of the neoliberal approach to deliver economic justice, equity and emancipation, and the consequent growing divide between a relatively small minority of rather more than a billion people and the majority of the world's population, with a clear rise in frustration and resentment among that majority at relative marginalisation and lack of life prospects.

In the environmental context, while a number of resource limitations and regional environmental impacts are important, the emphasis in the ORG analysis has to be on the most significant trend - climate change and especially its impact on human well-being especially as a result of severe effects on food production.

Finally, militarisation is seen partly in terms of a particularly entrenched and powerfully influential economic sector but most significantly as a culture in which the early use of military force is essential in maintaining the status quo, however unequal, unjust or unstable that order is.

In all cases, the ORG view is that these approaches are thoroughly inappropriate if we wish to avoid an unstable and violent world, and much more emphasis must be placed on the underlying causes of the problems and how they may be addressed. The failure of the current 15-year war on terror is the most grievous example, having led to hundreds of thousands of deaths, millions of displaced people, at least three failed or failing states and a continuing perception of the threat of political violence in western countries. The question, simply, is how does the new Trump era affect the possibility of taking the wider view?

Economic Issues

The early indications are that the Trump administration is a potentially unstable mix of those best described as economic nationalists and others, especially in the wider Republican Party, who are convinced neoliberals. The latter may be dubious about any trend towards protectionism and believe that in a free market which already favours the wealthy such protectionism may turn out to be counter-productive. In this view, transnational corporate organisation is a fact of life and no country, not even the United States, can go its own way for long.

The economic nationalists, who are dominant within Trump's inner policy circle, are very strongly convinced that the United States has sufficient power to dominate the markets that matter most. Furthermore, the whole Trump election platform was predicated on strong opposition to the perceived elite, an establishment that "ran" Washington. His appeal to those left behind, especially in the post-industrial American Mid-West, was probably the most important element in his successful election and it is an approach that will not readily be abandoned. At the same time, he was committed to policies that would reduce taxes while scaling down the Obamacare reforms – initially both popular with his supporters.

In the short-term Trump's policies may be popular but it may be as little as a year before those left behind find that their predicament simply does not ease. Indeed, it is already becoming clear that health provision reforms will lead to many millions of Americans facing higher costs, including many of those who voted for Trump. More generally, economic nationalism may turn out to provide little gain for the country as the power of China and other major economies becomes more apparent. "America first" is simply not sustainable in a globalised world.

Even so, what has to be faced is that the Trump era will not see any fundamental challenge to the neoliberal system, precisely in a period when that system is proving unfit for purpose. What may perhaps be more relevant is how long the Trump approach in its present form persists. The degree of disorganisation currently apparent in so many areas within the White House is hardly encouraging in terms of stability, and it may well be that as the 2018 mid-session elections to the House and Senate draw nearer, Trump's singularly soft Republican majority support in both Houses of Congress will lead to sudden changes of policy. These may not directly address core issues of inequality but could take much of the remaining lustre off the Trump approach.

Climate Change

This month has seen the very clear enactment of a number of policies that confirm that the Trump approach on climate change is one of denial coupled with the strong promotion of domestically-sourced fossil fuel resources. This is a highly negative approach for two reasons – there will be an increase in carbon emissions from the United States and a lack of leadership within the international community for addressing the considerable dangers stemming from climate change. This would seem disastrous for any hope of effectively preventing climate change but there are other very interesting factors at work.

Firstly, the reality of the dangers of uncontrollable climate change is far more recognised across the world than a decade ago. Many more states are accelerating their moves towards renewable energy sources, with the biggest emitter, China, making remarkable strides. Indeed, China may well see its way to playing a global leadership role. Secondly, the rapid developments in renewable energy technologies are making renewable sources far more economic, with many further developments coming closer to fruition. The effect of this is that renewable energy utilisation is now competing much more closely with fossil carbon sources and, as a consequence, there is a rapid increase in investment in renewables. More than half of all investment in electricity generation is now in renewables and in the United States and elsewhere there is far greater potential for employment in renewables than in fossil carbon sources.

Major problems remain including historic underinvestment in energy storage technologies and the need to cut carbon emissions by even more than most states currently accept, but the point here is that this is one area where there is every sign that Trump's policies are obsolete and likely to ensure that the United States is left high and dry. Even in the face of that, though, the ideological certitude of the climate change

deniers close to Trump means that the administration is unlikely to change. In short, the advent of the Trump era may limit the prospects for countering climate disruption but at least this will be another area where the Trump approach may be singularly counterproductive to any aim to make the United States the world leader.

Security

As with climate change, the first two-and-a-half months of the Trump administration have shown the translation of rhetoric into policy: control of migration, increased military spending and the more frequent use of force. Here, though, it is necessary to recall that the eight years of the Obama administration may have seen the withdrawal of US troops from substantial parts of the Middle East and Afghanistan but also saw the quiet transition to remote warfare with much greater use of air power, armed drones and Special Forces, not least in Libya and Iraq. The early signs are that Trump is expanding such operations rather than radically changing the posture and this includes even greater use of air power in the war against Islamic State (IS), as well as the deployment of even more Special Forces in Iraq, Syria and Yemen.

These kinds of changes are being reflected in the manner in which the Pentagon is being given a much freer hand to conduct operations, but there are already consequences. A major raid in Yemen in late January failed to achieve its objective while also killing many civilians, and the much-expanded use of air strikes in Mosul in the past month has led to such an increase in civilian casualties that they are even being reported in the mainstream western media. Even so, such consequences are unlikely to carry any weight with Trump unless there are serious disasters involving US military personnel.

The risk of this has been limited until now but one factor that has received little attention is that Trump's Pentagon is advocating, and indeed already initiating, a substantial increase in the number of "boots on the ground". In Iraq this is no longer just Special Forces but regular troop deployments which include, for example, units from the 82nd Airborne Division. Trump has also just agreed to give US forces in East Africa much more open powers to operate assaults on suspected al-Qaida-linked groups in southern Somalia, and there are also repeated calls for the Pentagon to expand its deployments in Afghanistan.

As with economic issues, such actions may be popular with Trump supporters in the short term, examples of forceful action in the task of "Making America Great Again", but based on the failures of the last fifteen years, the longer-term impact may be very different. What it does mean, though, is that as the United States seriously expands in overseas military operations then its close allies such as Britain will have to face up to whether they are willing to maintain their commitments.

Conclusion

These are, indeed, different times and with all three aspects of the sustainable security challenge the election of Trump is likely to exacerbate ingrained problems. At the same time, his policies may become increasingly irrelevant concerning climate change and his

economic popularity with his supporters may also erode quickly. This may well increase the temptation to use foreign military action to distract voters from domestic discontents. However, even in the military dimension there are unlikely to be any quick wins and Trump's direction of travel means that his allies could quickly come under domestic political pressure if they were to stay closely aligned with the United States. In any case, the need to rethink our attitudes to security remains critical and it is best to see the advent of the Trump era as a period when even more opportunity for creative, critical and independent rethinking of security will be essential.

About the Author

Paul Rogers is Global Security Consultant to Oxford Research Group and Professor of Peace Studies at the University of Bradford. His '[Monthly Global Security Briefings](#)' are available from our website. His new book *Irregular War: ISIS and the New Threats from the Margins* will be published by I B Tauris in June 2016. These briefings are circulated free of charge for non-profit use, but please **consider making a donation to ORG**, if you are able to do so.

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