



PISM | POLSKI INSTYTUT SPRAW MIĘDZYNARODOWYCH
THE POLISH INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

BULLETIN

No. 107 (1047), 8 November 2017 © PISM

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U.S. Foreign Policy a Year after the Election of Donald Trump

Andrzej Dąbrowski

Donald Trump announced he would profoundly change U.S. foreign policy, but as president, he has so far continued the policies under Barack Obama. This state has been determined by internal conflicts in the Trump administration, the growing dispute between the president and Congress, and the lack of a detailed foreign policy strategy.

Trump as candidate based his foreign policy message primarily on criticising the Obama administration. His main allegations included the enlargement of the foreign trade deficit, the failure to defeat terrorism, the U.S. opening to Iran and Cuba—which he characterised as hostile to America—underfunding of the armed forces, and erosion of the country’s global position. Trump’s policy as president has been to repeal Obama-era decisions he considers unfavourable to the U.S. At the same time, Trump’s lack of political experience, combined with his confrontational style of communication, especially in social media, undermine the credibility of American diplomacy.

U.S. Policy in Key Areas. Trump’s declarations of changes to U.S. foreign policy was not so much the result of coherent views on the issues but his personal dislike of Obama’s liberal vision of the international order and Trump’s campaign rhetoric against the then-sitting president. These declarations became a Trump commitment, but have hardly been fulfilled. In three policy areas that have been the United States’ focus of the last year—Transatlantic cooperation, East Asia, and the Middle East—continuity reigns concerning the most complex issues, although changes were made in areas where it was easy for the Trump administration to implement them.

Despite Trump’s severe criticism of NATO’s European members for their insufficient defence spending and his suggestion that American commitments to NATO may be conditional, the president has maintained the Obama administration’s decision to increase the presence of U.S. forces in Europe, including the deployment of a heavy armoured brigade to NATO’s Eastern Flank. He has proposed increasing the European Reassurance Initiative (ERI) budget in 2018 from \$3.4 billion to \$4.8 billion, which would allow for even more American exercises with European allies in the region.

Another change affected U.S.-EU relations more significantly. The negotiations on the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), a major trade pact, were suspended. Although the administration referred positively to German Chancellor Angela Merkel’s proposal to resume the negotiations, at the same time the U.S. announced an increase in tariffs on steel and aluminium imports, which would hit German industry. U.S. relations with some EU member states worsened after the adoption of a law on further sanctions on Russia that also allows penalties on European companies involved financially in Russian energy projects. The law will affect the planned Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline, financed by German, British, and French companies. In contrast to Obama, Trump has quite vocally emphasised the importance of Central and Eastern Europe in security and other matters. Trump showed his support for the region by attending

the Three Seas Initiative (TSI) summit in Warsaw in July, where he promoted European imports of American LNG and pointedly mentioned Russia as a source of destabilisation.

On East Asia matters, North Korea's nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programme, which threatens the security of key regional U.S. allies Japan and South Korea, has become the main challenge for the United States. Since Trump's inauguration, North Korea has conducted several missile tests and even a warhead test, prompting the U.S. to announce the end of its North Korea policy of "strategic patience." It has begun efforts to tighten UN sanctions on the North, relatively easily gaining the support of the permanent members of the Security Council and the international community to unanimously adopt Resolution 2375. At the same time, the U.S. deployed THAAD missile systems to South Korea and increased the scale and frequency of military exercises in the region. These actions, however, coincided with Trump's aggressive statements about the situation on social media, which escalated tensions and prompted fears of sparking deeper conflict.

On China policy, Trump's campaign promises to impose additional trade tariffs on Chinese goods has not materialised. As president, he also has acknowledged there is no basis for recognising China as a currency manipulator. Despite Trump's harsh rhetoric, there has been an improvement in relations between the two countries and even the signing of an agreement to open the Chinese financial-services market to U.S. companies. This rapprochement indirectly affected China's support for the implementation of the UN sanctions on North Korea. However, the Trump administration has yet to present a comprehensive policy strategy on China, instead basing an ad hoc position on the results of the April summit of the countries' leaders. Separately, Trump withdrew the U.S. from negotiations on the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), which would have formed a trade bloc to rival China, declaring the U.S. would now focus on bilateral trade agreements with partners in the region, including Japan.

On Middle East issues, the Trump administration has continued the Obama policy of combating the Islamic State (IS/ISIS) terror group. Trump also upheld the decision to use American special operations forces in Syria, increasing the number of deployed soldiers to 500. He also succeeded in persuading NATO members to formally join the global coalition against IS (though without increasing their combat contributions). Meanwhile, U.S. airstrikes on IS positions intensified. The administration has not announced a plan to engage in the reconstruction of Syria after the end of military operations against IS and is silent on its "exit strategy." Contrary to his campaign claims, the president has not withdrawn the U.S. from the multilateral nuclear deal with Iran. So far, he has chosen to "decertify" the agreement, giving Congress the opportunity to define further U.S. policy towards Iran. Trump also has presented only an outline of a new strategy for U.S. involvement in Afghanistan, which would increase the U.S. mission's capability depending on the situation and security requirements.

Conflicts in the Administration and with Congress. Trump, a Washington outsider, based his image of foreign policy on a false assumption of the presidency, namely that it had a predominant role over Congress and unconstrained ability to project economic, military, and political power. The president quickly came into conflict with Congress, which limited Trump's ability to pursue his plans. Proof of the antagonism between the White House and "the Hill" is a bill sent to him, which he signed, that restricts the president's ability to introduce or eliminate sanctions on several countries, including Russia. Trump's failure so far to improve U.S. relations with Russia derives from an unfavourable internal political context for the president that only exaggerated the differences in Russia's interests on Syria and Ukraine. The repeated accusations against Trump campaign staff and Cabinet officials regarding their contacts with Russian business people and diplomats, in light of U.S. intelligence reports on Russia's interference in the 2016 presidential election in America, have significantly reduced the Trump administration's abilities.

The effectiveness of the administration in its first months in office were further weakened by internal conflicts involving some of the president's closest associates. Two groups within the White House competed for greater influence on the decision-making process. After White House chief strategist Steve Bannon's resignation, opponents of radical shifts in U.S. foreign policy, including Chief of Staff John Kelly, Defense Secretary James Mattis, and National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster, became more influential with Trump. At the same time, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and the State Department, which he leads, have been marginalised, weakened in part by slow Senate reviews of key nominations of senior officials.

Conclusions. U.S. foreign policy under Trump suffers from a lack of regional strategies and is based on ad hoc decisions and suggestions by officials closest to the president. This method of governance makes it difficult to implement arrangements and complicates cooperation with U.S. allies. In addition, the administration's growing conflict with Congress and lack of mutual trust limits the ability of the U.S. to adopt and introduce new solutions and has a negative impact on the credibility of American foreign policy.

Trump's confrontational rhetoric has worsened transatlantic relations. On the other hand, the administration continues to strengthen Allied security on the Eastern Flank. Trump's participation in the TSI summit showed his willingness to support projects that could benefit U.S. economic interests. The summit example confirms that the Trump administration's involvement, given the asymmetry in U.S.-CEE potentials (political, military, economic), will depend on how the countries of the region secure America's interests in these relations.