

Client Alert

Government Advocacy & Public Policy Practice Group

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A Quick Snapshot Of President-Elect Trump's Foreign Policy Agenda

The big guessing game now in the wake of the election is, to what degree should we take Mr. Trump's election campaign rhetoric literally? This question applies across the board, but in foreign affairs the mystery may be deeper – and more alarming – than in other areas. This is because President-elect Trump has no background, no experience, little knowledge, and until now virtually no detailed intelligence information about complex foreign policies or foreign state behavior. In other words, it is certain that he does not fully grasp the consequences of actions that he has promised on the campaign trail.

Many of candidate Trump's stump statements or their implications are causing great anxiety, even downright fear. Leave NATO? Encourage nuclear proliferation? Tolerate Russian aggression? Use nuclear weapons? Use torture? Abandon the nuclear agreement with Iran?

There are at least three reasons why we should slow down and take a breath.

First, holding a President to the literal word of his campaign rhetoric is an unrealistic standard that arguably no President – and possibly no office holder – has ever entirely met once constrained by reality.

Second, Mr. Trump's complete lack of record in public policy formation – most especially foreign policy formation – should lead us to expect an even wider gap between rhetoric and reality.

Third, Mr. Trump is no ideologue. Unlike possibly all other presidents, this one will be transactional, motivated by his vision of gaining something here by giving up something there. And he believes he is good at it. We all try to play to our strengths.

In foreign affairs, the Monroe Doctrine, Containment Doctrine, Truman Doctrine, the Indispensable Nation, Freedom Agenda or any of the other attempts to force a coherent, comprehensive strategy on the chaos of world affairs have all had an ideological base. We have absolutely no hint that President-elect Trump sees the world in such a way.

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To illustrate how a non-ideological, pure businessman might approach foreign affairs, regardless of campaign rhetoric, we could look at his approach to President Obama's claimed signature achievements in that realm – Iran and Cuba.

Mr. Trump has said repeatedly and unambiguously in debates and at rallies that he would “tear up” the Iran agreement, charging that it is the worst agreement he has ever seen. Will he?

This is one area where the future President Trump could take effective action by himself. Most Iran sanctions were imposed by executive action and later lifted by executive action to implement the Iran agreement. President Trump could simply reverse those orders, re-imposing most U.S. unilateral sanctions on Iran.

What he could not do is re-impose the various multilateral sanctions regimes that were constructed over years of careful diplomacy with our allies, friends, and cooperators (including Russian and China).

The result of this Presidential action would almost certainly be Iran's abrogation of the agreement, a return to Iran's nefarious nuclear activities, this time on a truly industrial scale, and possibly – in as little as a year – development of nuclear weapons. Deployment on delivery vehicles would take a little longer.

Because the multilateral sanctions regimes are gone, and Iran is more well-funded in the wake of sanctions relief already, these nuclear activities would be largely unconstrained.

Needless to say, this would be a nightmare, especially for our principal regional ally Israel and Iran's principal regional adversary Saudi Arabia. It would lead to a collapse of seven decades of U.S. nonproliferation policy.

Once President Trump is aware of these consequences, he will see that, despite the agreement's obvious flaws, it cannot now be abandoned without unacceptable results. Many critics regarded the agreement as a bad bet on the unlikely prospect of Iran transforming itself before the agreement expires. But the bet has been made and the game must now play out.

What President Obama regards as his other foreign policy accomplishment – the change in Cuba policy and relationship – could similarly survive a Trump Administration.

Because Mr. Trump is not an ideologue, nor a doctrinaire Republican, and is attracted to seeking advantage through deal making, it is not clear at all that his election threatens the Obama legacy on Cuba.

In his one public comment so far on Cuba, Mr. Trump has already emphasized his reliance on business-like deal making. “I like the idea of an agreement,” he said, “but it has to be a real agreement... I would do whatever is necessary to get a good agreement. An agreement is fine.”

In other words, Mr. Trump has conceded that there is no rigid ideological reason to not deal with Cuba – a concept that President Obama regards as his historic contribution – and believes that he will be able to make a better deal. Maybe he can. Probably no other Republican in the White House would be approaching the task in this way.

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