

A Trump Second Term and International Security

by *Dov S Zakheim*¹

Resumé

Riksrättsprocessen mot Donald Trump nyligen – den tredje i USA:s historia och 30 år efter den senaste, mot Clinton – manifesterade en bitter partipolarisering som egentligen pågått och intensifierats under dessa tre decennier. Man kan alltså förvänta sig en hård batalj under den förestående presidentvalskampanjen. Denna kampanj kommer dock främst att handla om inrikespolitiska frågor, särskilt om Bernie Sanders blir Trumps motståndare. Internationella säkerhetsfrågor kommer att komma i andra hand, såvida inte USA under kampanjen dras in i en allvarlig internationell kris, och en sådan kan förstås inte uteslutas, även om det är Trumps basala instinkt att söka undvika en militär konflikt som kan kosta honom valsegern. Å andra sidan styrs Trump av instinkten att inte vilja framstå som svag, en ”förlorare” vilket kan leda till impulsiva beslut. Det är därför oerhört svårt att spekulera över vad fyra år till med Trump och ”America first” kan komma att innebära för internationell fred och säkerhet, särskilt i det största riskområdet, Mellanöstern. Att formellt lämna Nato är inte görligt, däremot att, som De Gaulle 1966, hoppa av Natos militära kommando, något som skulle få klart destruktiva följder. Amerikansk presidentmakt i Trumps händer skulle kunna ställa till stor skada, ett steg från ”America first” till ”America alone”.

I HAVE BEEN asked to comment on the international security implications of the current presidential election campaign; to focus particularly on the consequences of current developments in the Middle East; and to look ahead at the policies that a second Trump Administration might pursue.

Everyone is fully aware that Washington currently is undergoing yet another cycle of bitter partisanship. Nevertheless, while party conflict has been the norm virtually since the creation of the republic, America has just undergone only its third impeachment trial in its nearly 250 year existence. Significantly, the trial that just ended with the acquittal of President Donald Trump took place less than three decades since that of President Bill Clinton. With the exception of the immedi-

ate aftermath of the 9/11 tragedy, and the wide-ranging support for the initial stages of the George W. Bush Administration’s military operation against al-Qaida and the Taliban, the partisan rancor that was on full display during Clinton’s impeachment not only has not ceased but has continued to intensify.

Ironically, however, while the presidential election promises to be bitterly fought, its focus will be primarily on domestic concerns. These most notably will include the state of the economy, particularly the distribution of wealth and the imposition of higher taxes on corporations and wealthy individuals; immigration; climate change and other environmental issues; and what have been termed “values”, such as abortion and LGBTQ rights. The differences between the parties on all of

these issues will be exceedingly sharp whether or not Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont, the most extreme of the

Democratic candidates, wins the party's nomination to run against to Trump.

The level of defense spending—the Administration's fiscal year 2021 budget request calls for \$706 billion for the Defense Department—is likely to be included in presidential debates, assuming that Donald Trump chooses to participate, a decision he has yet to make. Defense spending will certainly be a theme of at least one major campaign speech by Trump and his opponent. As he has in the past, Trump will push for more defense spending; his Democratic opponent will certainly press for less.

Nevertheless, unless there is a major flare-up overseas that results in the deployment of significant levels of American forces, international security issues are unlikely to be at the forefront of the presidential campaign, much less dominate it.

The possibility that in the months leading up to the election America might be plunged into an international crisis that leads to armed conflict cannot be ruled out, however. That almost was the case when low-level strikes and counterstrikes between the United States and Iran culminated in the killing of Qasem Suleimani and the Iranian attacks on al Asad air base and Erbil airport that wounded dozens of American soldiers and affected dozens more with head pains.

Donald Trump's basic instinct is to avoid plunging America into a conflict because it might cost him the election. For that reason, he is pressing hard for a negotiated agreement with the Taliban that would allow a significant troop withdrawal from Afghanistan, thereby enabling him to claim that he kept his 2016 campaign promise to end America's longest, "endless" war.

Nevertheless, there is no way to predict how, and in what manner, he might respond to a new provocation such as an Iranian, or Iranian-sponsored attack on Americans, most likely outside Iran; a new North Korean nuclear test; or some new outrage that Venezuelan Nicolas Maduro might perpetrate against his own people.

Trump tends to react on the basis of emotion and what Americans term "gut instinct", especially when he is concerned that he might be viewed as weak or, worse still, a "loser." He could go to war to avoid being tagged with that label. Indeed, with both his acquittal, and his veto of a Senate resolution intended to limit his ability to enter into a conflict with Iran, Trump might feel especially empowered to do so.

At the moment, therefore, in the aftermath of Suleimani's assassination, the greatest threat to conflict remains in the Middle East. Nevertheless, it is possible that the Ayatollahs may choose to avoid any confrontation with the United States at least until they are able fully to reassert their control over a restive population that was re-energized by the government's attempt to cover up the Revolutionary Guard's downing of a Ukrainian civilian airliner. Should that be the case, Trump will likely remain quiescent as well. Yet, "likely", in the case of Mr. Trump is a loaded word, because Trump not only is inherently unpredictable, but has revealed in the fact that he is.

However difficult it may be to forecast Trump's behavior during the current presidential campaign predicting his behavior if he is re-elected (virtually all pundits consider that to be a certainty if Sanders is his opponent in the election) is an even more daunting challenge. Nevertheless, Trump does appear to have the rudiments of what might be termed a strategy, as indicated in a recent volume by Washington Post reporters

Philip Rucker and Carol Leonning. What is noteworthy about his reported interactions with the military is not only the policy positions that motivated his disparaging of his top generals and admirals, but also his refusal to countenance any reasoned push-back from his senior military and civilian advisors against those positions.

The book, like many that have previously appeared, pays special attention to Trump's Rasputin, Steve Bannon, who ran Trump's 2016 presidential campaign, and then served for a time as his chief strategist. In order to understand Trump's strategy, and how that might play out in a second term, one must first consider Bannon's positions on international security matters.

As is widely known, Bannon is the flame-throwing ultra-nationalist who edits the far-Right web journal *Breitbart News*. The former naval officer and investment banker is a frequent speaker at right-wing political meetings outside the United States. He opposes free trade, is hostile to immigrants, especially Muslims, castigates America's democratic allies, is comfortable with authoritarian regimes, and is an avowed proponent of the principle of "America first."

Trump reportedly was furious with Bannon after the publication of a tell-all book that presented the president in a bad light and clearly had Bannon as a major source. Yet what brought Bannon and Trump together remains Trump's essential world view.

Therefore, while one can only speculate as to what a re-elected President Trump might do, based on what he could do, not on what he actually will do, that speculation certainly is informed by the president's repeatedly stated policy preferences, which the latest revelations about his exchanges with his civilian national security leadership and his top military advisors further underscore.

It is important to recognize that since the end of World War II, American presidents have had considerable latitude with the respect not only to the management of foreign policy, but also to the ability to order military operations. From the Korean War to the killing of Suleimani, presidents have generally operated beyond the constraints that arise from the powers that the American constitution granted to the Congress.

For example, despite his clearly articulated dislike of NATO, Trump could not terminate America's membership in the Alliance because Washington is signatory to a Senate-approved treaty. In the event of an ongoing dispute with Europe, however, for example, if more NATO allies are willing to follow Britain's lead and refuse to ban Huawei 5G networks, Trump could take several steps that could severely damage America's relationship with NATO even if it does not withdraw from that organization.

In particular, Trump could withdraw the United States from NATO's integrated military command. He would have a precedent for doing so. Charles de Gaulle led France out of the command in 1966; France only fully returned to NATO in 2009. Should America withdraw from the command, it no longer could name the Supreme Allied Commander Europe. Nor could its officers serve in any other senior command positions. Its forces most likely would no longer train with those of other allies in NATO exercises. NATO command, control, communications and intelligence (C3I) operations would suffer from the absence of American participation. The absence of Americans in the NATO Military command would render the Alliance effectively toothless. It would also open Eastern Europe in particular to Russian predations.

The Congress could respond by approving a resolution to reverse the President's

action. As with the Senate-passed resolution on the authorization for the use military force against Iran, Trump could simply wield his veto power. Congress would then have to override that veto with no less than a two-thirds majority, a daunting prospect if hard-line Trump supporters were to occupy anything near the number of Senate seats that they do today.

The potential for the President to inflict a mortal wound on NATO is but one of several actions he could take to upend America's long-standing role as leader of the Free World. Indeed, the Pentagon has already reportedly considered withdrawing its C₃I support for French operations against Islamic terrorists in the Sahel. Doing so would seriously compromise France's ability to sustain its operations in Africa.

Similarly, Trump is likely to disappoint Britain, its closest ally, which Prime Minister Boris Johnson has led out of the European Union with the expectation that he could reach a trade agreement with the United States. As a recent Harvard University study points out, although the UK is a major partner for the United States in the services sector, it is a relatively minor factor when it comes to trade in goods. It is an open question whether Trump would devote his attention to an agreement with the UK while he is focused on obtaining major deals with China and the EU.

The Harvard study also observes that Trump's "mercantilist" approach to trade means that he would demand British concessions that would result in a deal that overwhelmingly favors American companies. Britain would have to make greater concessions on tariffs, food and healthcare as well as on other non-tariff barriers and on any agreements it may have reached with the EU in a post-Brexit environment. Given the relatively small size of the British economy

and in light of its break with the EU, were Trump to remain true to form and take a hard line stance on a trade agreement—a likely prospect especially in light of his anger at Johnson's defiant decision to let Huawei networks into his country—Britain could face an economic crisis reminiscent of the one it suffered in the late 'Sixties and early 'Seventies.

With respect to the Middle East, Trump clearly would like to reach a new agreement with Iran. He desperately desires to win the Nobel Peace Prize, if only because Barack Obama was a recipient. Nevertheless, if Iran were both to reject Trump's overtures and continue to violate the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), better known as the Iran nuclear deal, the president could conclude that the time had come to settle matters with Iran once and for all. He could order an attack on all known Iranian nuclear facilities and thereby touch off a major conflict that would inflame the entire region.

Alternately, the Israelis—feeling especially empowered by the Trump peace plan's implicit support for annexation for portions of the West Bank—may decide that they no longer could tolerate Iranian breaches of the JCPOA, because an Iranian nuclear capability would undermine Israel's own nuclear deterrent. The Israelis could either launch their own attack, or first seek and receive Trump's consent to do so. Iran would certainly respond to any Israeli strike and Trump might then elect not to stand by as Israel was attacked. In this case as well, therefore, America could find itself at war with Iran.

For its part, whether or not Israel launched the initial strike against its territory, the Iranian response would likely not only target Israel, but also Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. An Iranian attack on Saudi and Emirati petroleum facilities, inflicting even more damage than the September 2019

drone attacks on ARAMCO's Abqaiq and Khurais installations, would cause oil prices to skyrocket. Coupled with almost certain American (or Israeli) strikes against Iran's Kharg Island facilities, the result would be devastating for the economies of Europe, South Korea and Japan, as well as for China. At the same time, rising prices would work to the benefit of both Venezuela and Russia, enabling Maduro to further tighten his grip on his country and Putin to expand Russia's military power and its pressure on Europe.

Trump could also play a very disruptive role in Asia. He could seek once again to inject himself into the Indo-Pakistani dispute over Kashmir. Doing so not only would further complicate American relations with India but could also stoke further unrest in that already troubled region.

Should trade negotiations with China go no further than the current so-called phase one trade deal, here could be a renewal of tensions between the world's two largest economic powers. Coming at a time when there is some uncertainty about Chinese economic—and therefore political—stability in the wake of the coronavirus crisis such tensions would rattle the smaller Southeast Asian states that have sought to walk a fine line between Washington and Beijing. Tension with Beijing could lead to even greater Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea, or vis a vis Hong Kong and possibly Taiwan. In that context it is noteworthy that Rodrigo Duterte, the volatile president of the Philippines, has terminated a military agreement with Washington that had contributed to America's deterrent against China. Depending on how Trump responds to any of these developments, his

impulsiveness could seriously undermine the region's stability.

As has already been noted, were North Korea to explode a nuclear weapon, Trump's hopes of any agreement with Pyongyang would disappear. On the other hand, he might ratchet up pressure on Seoul to cover all of America's expenses for maintaining its presence in South Korea. He could use the North Korean explosion as leverage, and threaten to withdraw from the Peninsula.

Should Seoul not be sufficiently accommodating to Trump's liking, he could then order a complete troop withdrawal. Even if he were somehow to relent and reverse his decision, any such order to rattle both the Koreans and the Japanese, and either or both countries could decide that they would have no alternative but to go nuclear themselves.

Even such developments may not trouble a second term President Trump. After all, his mantra remains "America First." Nevertheless, were he to pursue policies reflecting that mantra, and do so no longer constrained either by impeachment worries or by the need to stand for re-election, these policies may well result in "America Alone." The implications of such a development would then be dire not only for Europe, the Middle East, and East Asia in particular, but for the rest of the world and the United States as well.

The author was an Under Secretary of Defense (2001–2004) and a Deputy Under Secretary of Defense (1985–87). He is a Senior Advisor at the Center for Strategic and International Studies and a Fellow of the Royal Swedish Academy of War Sciences.

Noter

1. Presentation in Stockholm hold by Div S Zackheim 21st January 2020.

Dov Zackheim, med en diger meritlista från olika ledande befattningar i bl a amerikanska försvarsdepartementet, är en i USA och internationellt känd och respekterad analytiker och debattör inom ett brett spektrum av säkerhets- och försvarspolitiska frågor. I Sverige har han ett sedan årtionden etablerat kontaktnät i säkerhetspolitiska kretsar, uppskattad i dessa som en person som förenar god kännedom om svensk och nordisk säkerhetspolitik med djuplodande kunskaper om, och kontakter inom, amerikansk inrikes- och utrikespolitik. Zackheim är

sedan länge kallad ledamot i akademiens avdelning VI och har som sådan genomgående varit en uppskattad och aktiv korresponderande medlem, regelbundet på besök i Sverige. Han medverkar aktivt i akademiens nuvarande SES-projekt. Dov Zackheim besökte Sverige i januari, inbjuden som deltagare i German Marshal Fund's Trilateral Strategic Group, och han passade då på att ge delar av akademin en presentation av sin syn på läget i USA och världen i perspektivet av pågående presidentvalskampanj och eventualiteten av fyra år till med Donald Trump. Texten här bygger på hans muntliga presentation då.