America, Europe and the world after the 2024 election[1]

by Dov S Zakheim

Resumé

Den tidigare topptjänstemannen vid USA:s försvarsdepartement, kallade ledamoten Dr Dov S Zakheim ger i artikeln sin syn på vad som sannolikt är att vänta under den blivande presidenten Donald Trumps ämbetsperiod, framförallt från ett utrikes- och säkerhetspolitiskt perspektiv. Författarens analys tyder på att tämligen få av Trumps medarbetare från perioden 2017–2021 kommer att återfinnas i den nya administrationen. Däremot väntas personer som intagit en skeptisk hållning till Nato, EU och Ukrainakriget, liksom uttalat sig för en protektionistisk handelspolitik och en prioritering av Östasien att välkomnas i den kommande presidentadministrationen. Trots att valresultatet ger Trump ett starkare mandat än han hade tidigare, är det mindre sannolikt att han formellt kan få igenom ett beslut där USA lämnar Nato. Däremot kommer Trump att ha de maktbefogenheter som krävs för att göra reella nerskärningar i USAs bidrag om han så önskar. Få av de som ska tjänstgöra i Trumps administration har när artikeln skrivs utnämnts. Lojalitet mot den tillträdande presidenten verkar rankas högt rörande önskvärda kvalifikationer när de närmaste medarbetarna ska utses under november och december månad. En viktig insikt som författaren för fram är att det inte tillhör ovanligheterna att en presidents uttalat politiska mål får anpassas till den reella händelseutvecklingen.

ON JULY 2, 2024, bowing to the increasing pressure from both leading members of his party as well as many of his most important donors, President Joe Biden withdrew his candidacy for re-election. His decision to withdraw from the 2024 presidential race fundamentally changed the nature of the presidential election and with it the prospects for America's relations with Europe after his term would come to an end.

Biden had been a weak candidate; his halting and at times confused performance in his debate with Trump on June 27 convinced all but his immediate family and closest advisors that he was an aging figure who lacked the stamina to compete with Donald Trump, though Trump was only a few years younger than the 81-year-old president. If Biden were to remain in the race, he was certain to lose. As soon as Biden bowed out, the Democrats coalesced around vice-president Kamala Harris and anointed her as his successor, initially much to Trump's chagrin. The former president had not seriously considered that he might be opposed by a considerably younger and far more vigorous candidate who could unite the disparate and often conflicting elements on the Democratic Party in a manner that Biden simply could not. At the end of the day,

however, the change in Democratic candidates did not matter. Trump won the 2024 election decisively, not only winning in the electoral college, but also the popular vote, an outcome that virtually no pollsters and pundits had foreseen.

Trump drew votes not only from his MAGA base, but from a surprisingly high percentage of Hispanic voters and nearly twice the percentage of African-American voters. He also improved his showing among women voters.

While it is not clear that his "coattails" affected the Congressional races, Republicans did take the Senate with an unassailable 53-47 majority and were poised to take the House as well, though with only a slender majority. As a result, Trump will have a far greater ability to have Congress approve his programs—and his judicial nominations—than Biden has had, or indeed Trump himself during his first term.

Trump ran a nasty, divisive campaign. But his behavior was no surprise to the American voting public. Instead, the election's outcome reflected public dissatisfaction with an array of Biden Administration domestic policies, from which Harris could not, or would not, distance herself. In particular, ordinary Americans refused to believe the Administration's assertions that the economy had improved under the Biden-Harris team's leadership. While the stock market hit record levels, and inflation remained modest, gasoline prices continued to remain high, and food prices continued to climb, as did housing prices. The more that they were told that economic life was better for them, the more cynical a majority of Americans became.

Harris also was unable to convince voters that she had any solution to the massive increase in illegal immigration during the Biden Administration's term. Whereas a million illegals entered the country during Trump's term, four times as many did so while Biden was in office. Moreover, Harris' own record on immigration issues was at best mixed. She failed to affect the flow of migrants during her relatively brief effort to help stem the flow from the Central American states from which they emigrated. She only visited the so-called "Northern Triangle" states—El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras—but once, and soon faded from the scene as far as immigration was concerned.

Finally, Harris focused excessively on the importance of women's reproductive choice, while saying nary a word about the role of transsexuals in competitive youth sports, an issue that has enflamed many Americans, including many Democrats. Indeed, many of the same Americans who voted for abortion rights in both Red and Blue state referenda nevertheless supported Trump and the Republicans in the national election despite their tendency to advocate for limiting those rights.

Harris also stressed Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) programs. Yet the increase in hiring practices that prioritize DEI in industry and especially in academia likewise angered Americans who have felt that such programs discriminated against them.

The election outcome clearly portends a change not only in domestic policy but also in America's foreign and national security policy and, indeed, its role as the leader of the Free World. Given his previous record as president, Trump's remarkable comeback has been the source of considerable trepidation among America's allies and friends, not least in Europe. Biden has been a long-time internationalist in general, and Europeanist in particular. Biden was chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee three times between 2001 and 2009, and served as its ranking member from 1997 until he

became chairman and subsequently when he did not chair the committee. More particularly, Biden also was a three-time chairman of the committee's subcommittee on European affairs and was co-chairman of the Senate's NATO Observer Group. While serving in the Senate Biden was a strong supporter of arming the Bosnians and of NATO's intervention in the Balkan War.

Trump, on the other hand, demonstrated during his first term in office that his approach to foreign policy was purely transactional, with no sense of commitment to America's NATO allies, its Asian allies, and, apart from a few states such as Israel and Saudi Arabia, its partners and friends. Moreover, he evinced little antipathy towards its adversaries or more generally authoritarians of any stripe.

Trump's statements in the 2024 electoral cycle gave no hint that his approach to America's overseas relations has changed since he left the White House in 2020. Indeed, in choosing J D Vance as his vice-presidential candidate, Trump signaled that he is totally comfortable with American neo-isolationism, which he has long trumpeted under the "America First" slogan that he recycled from the isolationist mantra of the 1930s.

There is little that is not known about Donald Trump's foreign and national security policy orientation. He is fundamentally transactional, and primarily concerned with his personal, and some allege, financial, self-interest. He has openly admired autocrats, and Vladimir Putin in particular. His relationship with Putin is puzzling, to say the least. He claims that had he been president, Putin would never have invaded Ukraine; his assertion, like so many others, ranges between unverifiable and downright fanciful. Trump's negative attitude toward NATO and the NATO allies likewise reflects his isolationist impulses, as well as his strong belief that the allies should pay the United States for the protection it affords them. He asserts that it was his threats that led many of the European NATO allies to increase their defense spending with many but not all of them reaching NATO's stated goal that they allocate to defense at least two per cent of their Gross Domestic Products.

While there is some truth to that particular claim, Putin's invasion of Ukraine was an equal, if not greater contributing factor in waking Europe up to the need to bolster its defenses. In any event, Trump now asserts that two per cent. is not enough. He has now called for the NATO allies each to increase their defense spending to three per cent of GDP, a target that almost all of them are unlikely to seek to reach, much less achieve. Any attempt at such an increase would force harsh reductions in domestic expenditures and could lead to domestic instability.

Trump's antipathy toward NATO will not result in America's withdrawal from the Alliance. The 2024 National Defense Authorization Act constrains any effort to leave NATO without two-thirds of the Senate voting to do so. Republicans only control the Senate with a 53-47 majority, far short of the two-thirds requirement. Nevertheless, Trump would have at his disposal other ways to emasculate NATO even if the United States remains a nominal member of the Alliance. He could, for example, emulate Charles de Gaulle, and withdraw America from NATO's integrated military command. He could withdraw troops from Europe as he did in 2020, when he capped American troop presence in Germany at 25 000, a 9 500 reduction in the forces stationed there. He could also stop all military and civilian officials from serving in NATO positions of any kind. And he could impound any monetary contributions to NATO activities, such as the NATO infrastructure fund.

If Trump's attitude towards NATO has been the source of considerable trepidation among America's European partners, his views regarding support for Ukraine are equally alarming. Although he, not Barack Obama, authorized the initial transfer of Javelin anti-tank missiles to Ukraine, Trump has made it clear that he wishes to terminate American materiel assistance to the beleaguered state. In addition, he has promised to bring an end to the Russo-Ukrainian war as early as his first day in office an outcome that could only work in Moscow's favor.

Should Trump act upon his promise, Ukraine would be certain to lose much if not all of its four eastern oblasts, as well as Crimea in any negotiation with Russia. Worse still, Europeans expect that Putin might seek even more Ukrainian territory, emulating Hitler's 1938 seizure of the Sudetenland, with the result that Ukraine either would disappear entirely, or at best be transformed into the tiny rump state that appears on a map former president and deputy chairman of Russia's security council Dmitry Medvedev has publicized.

Moreover, Europeans fear that Putin could go even further, threatening not only non-NATO states like Moldova, but, given Trump's indifference to NATO, the Baltic states as well. In that regard it is worth recalling that Vladimir Putin essentially laid out his future plans for Russia in his 2007 speech to the conference, which also was marked by his bitterness towards the West in general and the United States in particular. His words are worth repeating, at least in part, because they foreshadowed Russia's growing antagonism for nearly the next two decades. "I consider that the unipolar model is not only unacceptable but also impossible in today's world…I think it is obvious that NATO expansion does not have any relation with the modernization of the Alliance itself or with ensuring security in Europe. On the contrary, it represents a serious provocation that reduces the level of mutual trust."

Recognizing that Trump could force a reluctant Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky to negotiate with Putin, Biden has announced an effort to transfer about six billion dollars' worth of military equipment in the two months before he leaves the White House. He has the means to do so. There remains $4 billion in Presidential Drawdown Authority that he can call upon, as well as another $2 billion that he can dispense from the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative. What remains unclear is whether he will lift restrictions on Ukrainian employment of that aid, enabling its forces to strike deep into Russia, and whether that assistance will include additional aircraft among other systems. Biden also has not given any indication that Washington will lift restrictions on Ukrainian use of European systems that include American components. Yet Ukraine will need a free hand to operate both American and European systems in order to strengthen its bargaining position when Trump takes office and the inevitable negotiation gets under way.

Just as Trump has not changed his views regarding NATO, so he appears to evince no more goodwill toward the European Union than he did during his previous term in the White House. He remains a fervent supporter of tariffs, which he believes could offset any losses to the government that would result from reductions in taxes. It is reported that he would raise tariffs on European goods by at least ten per cent., ignoring warnings by leaders such as Britain's foreign David Lammy that doing so could further undermine America's relations with its closest allies.

Trump's planned tariff increases are harshest when aimed at China. He has proposed increasing tariffs on selected Chinese goods by

sixty per cent, which could result in as much as a 2.5 per cent decline in China's Gross Domestic Product. Such a decline would be especially serious for Beijing, given the country's already weak economic performance. China could be expected to retaliate, with a resulting negative impact on inflation in the United States, to which Trump appears indifferent, at least for the moment.

Given China's currently sluggish economy, president Xi Jin Ping will be sorely tempted to distract his populace with even more external aggressiveness than he has already demonstrated in the South and East China Seas, as well as in his barely concealed support for Putin's invasion of Ukraine. Because Trump has not signaled that he is as determined to support Taiwan as his outgoing predecessor, Xi may view Trump's attitude as offering a real opportunity to "resolve" China's Taiwan issue once and for all.

It should be noted that previous American military predictions that China could attack Taiwan in 2027 fall within the Trump Administration's term of office.

Whether Trump will adopt a less ambiguous stance in support of Taiwan prior to that year could determine whether Xi does order am attack or embargo on what Beijing terms its "renegade province."

Trump appears inclined to increase tariffs on Asian as well as European goods. Doing so could undermine the Biden Administration's successful effort to rally Japan, South Korea, Australia and several members of ASEAN, in addition to NATO and the EU to work together to deter Chinese adventurism and preserve freedom of navigation in the South China Sea. Key ASEAN partners such as Vietnam and the Philippines in particular would suffer economically should Trump impose the promised tariffs. That in turn would undermine their ability to bolster their defenses to confront China in the South China Sea. Whether Trump will be more precise in targeting those tariffs so as to exclude America's key European and Asian allies and partners remains an open question.

Trump's views regarding the Middle East likewise appear to have remained unchanged. During his term of office, Trump displayed unflinching support for Israel, though that may have been due to the outsized influence of his daughter Ivanka, a convert to Judaism, and his son-in-law, Jared Kushner, both of whom served as his senior advisors. Neither are playing a prominent role in the current presidential campaign.

It is noteworthy that Trump also maintained close ties with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman of Saudi Arabia, due to both Kushner's relationship with the Crown Prince and his own business prospects in the oil-rich kingdom. Trump evinced little interest in Saudi Arabia's human rights record and likewise tended to ignore Egypt's alleged human rights violations. He continues to remain silent regarding both, likely because he invariably tends to ignore human rights concerns.

Trump has stated that he supports Israel's effort to destroy Hamas, but wants that war to end quickly. He has not attached any provisos for Israel's war with Hezbollah, nor has he warned Israel not to attack Iran should Tehran again fire missiles and drones at the Jewish state. To the contrary, Trump has made it clear that he will renew his "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran, which would seriously undermine both the Iranian economy as well as Tehran's ability to finance its proxies.

J D Vance, Trump's choice for his vice-presidential running mate, has less than two years' service in the Senate and no prior governmental experience. He enlisted in the Marine Corps spent four years in the service and was deployed to Iraq for six months. He did not

see any combat and was assigned as what he termed a "combat journalist;" he actually was a public affairs official. He retired from the Marine Corps with the rank of Corporal; he does not serve in the Reserves.

Because Trump is so transactional as well as self-centered, it is not at all clear whether Vance would have any influence over him, though his neo-isolationist stance during the campaign could well reinforce Trump's own instincts in that regard.

Trump has moved quickly to fill many senior cabinet positions in his forthcoming Administration. His national security and foreign policy team includes few who served in his prior Administration. Among the more noteworthy names that he chose not to appoint were former secretary of state Mike Pompeo and Nikki Haley former Ambassador to the UN. Trump considered them both to be insufficiently loyal.

Indeed, his national security appointments all went to trusted loyalists.

Trump has named Marco Rubio, Senator from Florida, to serve as secretary of state. Although he ran against Trump in the 2016 Republican primaries, Rubio has since become a key Trump loyalist. Given Trump's record of hostility to NATO, it is noteworthy that Rubio co-sponsored (with Democrat Tim Kaine) the Joint Resolution Requiring Senate Advice and Consent for NATO Withdrawal that ultimately became law in 2024. On the other hand, like Trump he is a staunch advocate for Israel, and an equally tough critic of China.

Unlike Rubio, who was frequently mentioned as a possible secretary of state, Pete Hegseth, Trump's choice for secretary of defense, came as a complete surprise to the Washington cognoscenti. Hegseth is a Fox television host, with no management experience beyond serving as a company commander in Afghanistan and Iraq where he earned to bronze stars for heroism. He is a hard-core MAGA supporter, however.

Trump has announced that he plans to issue an executive order to create a "warrior board" consisting of retired senior officers who would review the records of currently serving three-and four-star generals and admirals and recommend removals of those they consider unfit for their positions. It is expected that Hegseth will go along with their recommendations, which could focus on both performance in the chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 and the introduction into the military of what Republicans view as "woke" values, such as an overemphasis on gender issues and on climate change. Many observers consider that Trump will ask Air Force General C Q Brown to resign his chairmanship of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Congressman Mike Waltz, the new national security advisor, was one of the first legislators to announce his support for Trump. The position, despite its importance does not require Senate confirmation as do the secretaries of state and defense.

Waltz, a retired Green Beret, has represented Florida since 2019. A member of the House Armed Services Committee, he has echoed Trump's demand that Europe increase its support for Ukraine. But he has not called for a reduction in military American participation in NATO. Significantly, Waltz has a reputation for working amicably with his Democratic colleagues, an increasingly rare trait on Capitol Hill.

Trump has not fully fleshed out his appointees to lead the intelligence community, but he has named John Ratcliffe to lead the CIA. Ratcliffe served in the first Trump Administration as Director of National Intelligence, a job more senior than CIA director. Nevertheless, as Bill Burns demonstrated in the Biden Administration, the CIA

director is still extremely powerful and can take on the most sensitive missions. Ratcliffe is a solid Trump loyalist and therefore may prove as important to the new president as Burns has been to Biden.

Trump announced that he will appoint New York Congresswoman Elise Stefanik, to serve as Ambassador to the United Nations. Stefanik is currently the fourth ranking leader of House Republicans. She garnered national attention when she castigated the presidents of Harvard, Cornell and Columbia universities for equivocating regarding anti-Semitism on their respective campuses. Ultimately all three resigned their positions, which many have viewed as a major victory for the Congresswoman. Stefanik has been a critic of the United Nations and like Rubio, a staunch supporter of Israel.

Apart from Stefanik Trump has named former Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee to be Ambassador to Israel; thus far it is the only ambassadorial nomination that the president-elect has announced. Huckabee, an Evangelical Christian, is, even more than Stefanik, a rock-solid supporter of the Jewish State with close ties to its current government and the settler movement. His daughter was Trump's White House press secretary from 2017–2019.

Trump has designated Tom Homan, who previously served as director of Customs Enforcement, as his "border czar." He has also named Stephen Miller, another immigration hardliner, as deputy to White House Chief of Staff Susie Wiles. Miller is likely to have a far greater mandate than his title implies. Instead, like Karl Rove in the George W Bush Administration who held the same post, Miller will have an outsized influence over an array of policy matters extending well beyond immigration issues.

Trump has also indicated that he will ask Elon Musk, the world's richest person, and former rival Vivek Ramaswamy to lead a cost-cutting effort to trim the federal bureaucracy, which many observers—not just right-wing Republicans—consider to be far too bloated. Trump is calling their effort "the Department of Government Efficiency" though it is unlikely that he will create an actual department since he ants to slash the numbers of government employees, not add to them with a new bureaucracy. In addition, Trump has announced that he will enable Robert F. Kennedy, Jr, a leading opponent of vaccines and proponent of other ideas that most people consider beyond the pale, to "go wild on health."

Despite the usual speculation what can be expected of the winning candidate's senior advisors and cabinet officers, presidents will not necessarily pursue policies with which they previously were identified or indeed with their stated priorities during their campaigns for the White House. Moreover, external events will influence a president's decisions—which indeed might involve an about-face from his (or her) previous priorities. As former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates has put it, "the enemy gets a vote." Moreover, Trump appointees had very short shelf-lives in his first administration, and that may again be the case when he returns to the White House.

Trump's choices are uniformly solid loyalists. Nevertheless, it is also worth noting that presidents can and do ignore the recommendations that their senior advisors proffer to them, and at times have done so on the most critical of issues. Truman ignored George Marshall's strong opposition to recognizing the State of Israel and instead elected to follow the advice of his political aide, Clark Clifford. Similarly, Lyndon Johnson stubbornly refused to give any weight to Under Secretary of State George Ball's opposition to continuing, indeed, escalating, America's

operations in the Vietnam War. It was a decision that ultimately led Johnson to withdraw from the 1968 presidential campaign.

Clearly, the people that Donald Trump has designated as his team of advisors offers a strong indication of what his Administration's priorities will be, at least in the early months of its term of office. It is for that reason that America's allies, partners, and friends are already making every effort to determine as best they can not only Trump's own statements during the campaign, but the previous writings and statements of those he has named to serve as his closest advisors. Still, given Trump's previous track record, what he and his Administration might or might not do when he returns to the White House will remain an open question that might only be answered on a day-to-day basis.

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Note

1. Lecture at the Royal Swedish Academy of War Sciences, 26 August 2024