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Editors: Sławomir Dębski (PISM Director) ● Katarzyna Staniewska (Managing Editor)
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Foreign Policy under the Trump Administration: Starting Point

Andrzej Dąbrowski, Patrycja Sasnal

The Trump administration's shaping of foreign policy will be affected by the likelihood of a divergence of views within the administration, the conflict-prone temperaments of the president's closest advisors, lack of full support from Republicans in Congress and the significant informal impact of the Trump family on the president. These could result in conflict in three areas: disputes within the administration, between formal and informal advisors to the president, and between the executive and legislative branches of the U.S. government.

Differences within the Administration. U.S. foreign policy is created and led by the president with the help of his administration, most importantly by the Secretary of State (nominee Rex Tillerson) and Secretary of Defense (nominee James Mattis, who only awaits full Senate confirmation). An important role also will be played by Vice President Mike Pence and the National Security Advisor (nominee Michael Flynn). The president's lack of experience in foreign affairs may result in a rivalry among the new administration officials for influence over the decision-making process. With differences of opinion on key foreign policy issues, experience and personality, this rivalry may turn into a series of open conflicts.

President Trump has cited fighting "radical Islam" and terrorism as a top U.S. global priority. He also promised to revise U.S. policy towards China, change the agreement on Iran's nuclear programme and stated he intends to cooperate with Russia. Trump criticised European integration and the costs of U.S. alliances in NATO and in the Asia-Pacific region. These views are shared by Flynn, who has been and would be one of the closest advisors on international affairs to President Trump as coordinator of the National Security Council. Among the key foreign policy positions, Flynn was the first named nominee, which signifies the confidence Trump has in him. Many of Trump and Flynn's views are not shared by Mattis, who was confirmed by the Senate Armed Services Committee to be the next Secretary of Defense and who has far broader experience in foreign affairs and was commander of U.S. Central Command. In his nomination hearing, Mattis emphasised the threat from Russia. He also considers NATO treaty obligations to be inviolable. Vice President Pence had a similar viewpoint, although contrary to Mattis he spoke in favour of cancelling the agreement on Iran's nuclear programme. Tillerson, like Mattis, sees Russia's foreign policy as a threat, though in many respects his stands are still vague, which positions him halfway between Mattis and Flynn with Trump.

The positions of these officials will not necessarily correspond to their true influence on the White House decision-making process. Informal advisors sometimes have had a significant impact on a president's views. President Trump has put his greatest faith in family members, including daughter Ivanka, sons Eric and Donald Jr., but mainly his son-in-law Jared Kushner, who has been nominated as a "special advisor" (an unofficial title) to the president on trade and the Middle East. Trump's family members have international business connections and an interest in international affairs, including meeting with foreign political leaders. If informal advisors gain a greater impact on Trump's decisions than high-ranking officials, this might create a new area of conflict.

The Administration and Congress. The prerogatives of the executive branch to conduct foreign policy are limited by the powers reserved by Congress, including the power of appointment, right to make laws, general legislative pressure, and the so-called "power of the purse," that is, control over the financing of the administration's foreign policy aims. In January, the 115th Congress started its term in office. Republicans have majorities in the House of

Representatives (241 of 435 seats) and the Senate (52 of 100 seats). The new administration officials, as well as new senators and representatives are taking office in a time of tense relations and mistrust between Congress and the White House. Although for the first time in 10 years the Republicans have full control of the executive and legislative branches of the U.S. government, it is certain that Trump will encounter resistance from the establishment wing of his party on some of the changes he promised to introduce.

Trump won the election, in part because of his promise to “drain the swamp” of the Washington establishment, whether Democrat or Republican. The new president’s declaration has meant a clash with some influential Republicans, including some whom Trump tried to discredit during the primary election, such as Sen. Marco Rubio. Trump’s similar treatment of many other high party leaders means one may assume these Republicans might seek an opportunity to push back against the president by creating ad hoc coalitions with Democrats or independents on certain legislative needs.

A clear division between Trump and many top Republicans is his and his administration nominees’ viewpoint on Russia. Among the Republican leaders promoting an assertive policy towards Russian actions are widely respected senators Lindsay Graham and John McCain. They are supported by Rubio and early Trump opponent Ben Sasse. They openly accuse Russia of aggression against Ukraine, including the illegal annexation of Crimea, war crimes committed in Syria by forces supporting the Assad regime’s military—among them, atrocities committed in Aleppo—and creating a threat to U.S. allies in Central and Eastern Europe. These Republicans also emphasised the role Russia played in the 2016 election. The Republican chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, Richard Burr, announced hearings with Trump administration officials regarding the investigation into Russian intelligence activities against the U.S. Meanwhile, McCain, Graham, Rubio and Sasse, together with the Democrats in the Senate, introduced a bill aggravating the sanctions against Russia.

Kevin McCarthy, the Republican majority leader in the House of Representatives, also expressed scepticism towards some of Trump’s proposals. He has already stated that Trump’s call for a 35% duty on goods imported to the U.S. by producers who had relocated production units outside the country is not going to happen. According to McCarthy and Speaker of the House Paul Ryan, the United States should not initiate “trade wars” with other countries.

This administration will, however, find support from a large portion of the Republican Congress. One of the more important allies for Trump will be Senate majority leader Mitch McConnell. Trump nominated McConnell’s wife, Elaine Chao, to be Secretary of Transportation. McConnell enjoys a significant amount of respect among his party colleagues, which might suggest that the role of mediator between factions opposing the president and the White House will fall to him. In negotiations on individual bills or conflict mitigation, Trump likely will draw on the significant legislative experience of Vice President Pence and White House Chief of Staff Reince Priebus.

Conclusions. Each new U.S. administration over time develops a particular way of making decisions. In Trump’s case, the process will be hampered by disagreements within the administration, the impact of informal advisors on a president distrustful of experts, and by the lack of full support from the Republican Party. The timeframe will also be lengthened by hearings in the Senate, meaning it is possible that the administration will start operating at full strength only after a few months.

The views of Pence and Mattis on one hand and Trump and Flynn on the other conflict on key issues such as America’s vision for its role in the world, its policy towards Russia, and the place of allies in overall U.S. strategy. It is also possible the decision-making process will be dominated by the National Security Advisor, which is a post not subject to Senate approval and in the first months after Trump’s inauguration will have greater freedom and opportunity to influence the president than his Cabinet nominees. Flynn’s influence will be balanced by that of Mattis and Pence, who as vice president has the right to appoint his own National Security Advisor. Pence said he wants to copy former VP Dick Cheney’s model of a strong vice-presidency. A history of conflict in the intelligence community, which is part of Flynn’s legacy, does not promise smooth and efficient cooperation with the vice president and incoming Cabinet members. It is unlikely that Flynn can play the traditional role of National Security Advisor, which was coordinating arrangements between the Department of State and Department of Defence.

Despite the possible internal administration conflicts, the decision-making process may still be quick. Regardless of counsel, Trump’s point of view will be the most important and it is expected he will make the final decisions. Their implementation, however, can be slowed because of conflicts with the Cabinet, vice president, or Congress, including mainstream Republicans.

Given the Republican majorities in the House and Senate, it would seem that disagreements between Congress and the president would be less frequent. In practice, however, conflict still happens even when a single party gains control over two branches of the U.S. government. In the case of the 115th Congress, the number of conflicts may be higher also because the party itself is deeply divided on Trump’s views on foreign policy. Additional conflict may come from the property and business interests of the president and his officials.