

# The Trump Administration and the Mediterranean

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The election of President Trump, and the experience of the first months of his administration, raises important questions about the future of American foreign policy. Beyond looming issues of strategy toward China and Russia as geopolitical competitors, and flashpoints on the Korean Peninsula and elsewhere, the new administration in Washington looks to take a different tack on trade, foreign assistance, climate, human rights, alliance burden-sharing and counter-terrorism. All of these elements will have direct implications for the Mediterranean region, north and south. The Mediterranean will offer some critical near-term tests for the Trump Administration – and Mediterranean partners are likely to face some new and unconventional challenges in their relations with Washington.

## Rhetoric and Reality

President Trump's campaign rhetoric suggested a revolutionary approach to foreign and security policy, challenging key elements of the international policy canon. Much of this was simply about candidate Trump's brash style and direct, Twitter-driven commentary. His mode of communication, while unconventional, is by no means unprecedented. International leaders have increasingly turned to public diplomacy as a vehicle for policy pronouncements.

Allowing for vast technical change, it is not so far removed from the Leninist aim of reaching over the heads of governments to speak directly to publics, domestic and foreign. Style does matter in foreign policy, and the style of the new administration has been a striking departure from the measured approach of most, but not all American leaders (George W. Bush was initially seen as abrasive by many in Europe and elsewhere). Personality, and personal relationships also matter, and here President Trump is running true to form. His early meetings with foreign leaders suggest a heavy emphasis on this element. Initial meetings with Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu and Egyptian President Sisi were characterized by convergence on counter-terrorism and other policy issues. But a degree of personal affinity also seemed to play a role in these encounters. By contrast, early discussions with Chancellor Merkel and others have been cooler affairs, and the May 2017 meetings in Brussels and Taormina were distinctly tense. How the President will view leading political figures on both sides of the Mediterranean over time remains to be seen, but questions of affinity and trust will not be far from the surface. Where policy differences are significant this could well be a determining factor – the relationship with Turkey and its assertive President will continue to be a key test. The contentious relationship with Russia, an increasingly important factor in the eastern Mediterranean, will be another. Some months into the new administration, it is clear that American foreign policy retains some of its characteristic contours, even if the style is more assertive and President Trump's language is a stark departure from that of his predecessor.<sup>1</sup> Relations with China

<sup>1</sup> See Dov S. ZAKHEIM. "Trump and Allies in American National Security," *Proceedings and Journal*, Royal Swedish Academy of War Sciences, NR1/2017; and Zalmay KHALILZAD, "The Emerging Trump Doctrine?," *The National Interest*, 28 July, 2016.

and Russia have reverted to a more traditional geopolitical form, driven by policy interests and differences that will be hard to bridge, and may well deepen. The April 2017 cruise missile strike on Syrian targets related to the regime's use of chemical weapons against civilians was arguably the same kind of response that Hillary Clinton might have made, or indeed President Obama if he was able to replay his response to a similar incident during his presidency. In an important sense, the strike had more to do with the structural American interest in deterring the use of weapons of mass destruction than with the situation in Syria per se. But the sheer barbarity of the Assad regime and the perceived unreliability of Russian assurances probably played a role in President Trump's calculus. Intelligence and surveillance capabilities make atrocities hard to hide, and presented with these realities, American presidents are often spurred to act, even when the appetite for intervention is limited (President Clinton reacted in a similar fashion after being shown satellite photos of the mass graves in Srebrenica in 1995). The prevalence of such conflicts around the Mediterranean Basin suggests that this is unlikely to be the last example of American action along these lines.

Even if the gap between campaign rhetoric and foreign policy reality has narrowed, there are some obvious areas of contrast in policy outlook, especially vis-à-vis the Obama Administration, with its rather European sense of global priorities and caution in the use of American power. Many observers have pointed to the more transactional nature of international relationships in the new administration. This implies a sovereignty-conscious, interests-driven approach, with less automatic support for traditional partnerships, and greater emphasis on burden sharing (measured in tangible terms). Questions of democracy promotion, human rights and nation building are unlikely to be high on the new Washington agenda.<sup>2</sup> The decline of internal issues on bilateral and multilateral agendas will have implications for relations with countries around the southern Mediterranean, not least Turkey and Egypt, where it has always been difficult for Washington to balance normative and national security interests. This hard-

er, realist view of international affairs seems broadly shared within the administration, even if the tone is more measured outside the White House.

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It is worth recalling that this more critical approach did not start with President Trump. Towards the end of his last term, President Obama was outspoken in questioning the norms and prescriptions of the American foreign policy establishment.<sup>3</sup> A far more cautious attitude toward the use of American power had taken hold among Democrats and Republicans in Congress after the Iraq experience of the Bush years. The democracy promotion so closely associated with the neo-conservative agenda of the Bush years, and pursued as "democratic enlargement" in the Clinton Administration, has always had its critics.<sup>4</sup> The Trump Administration is unlikely to abandon its scepticism about this idealist tendency in American foreign policy. But a purely realist strategy will be difficult to pursue. Important constituencies in Congress and elsewhere will make it hard for Washington to entirely abandon its support for various assistance and reform efforts, even as the Trump Administration endeavours to reduce or eliminate funding for such programmes. Overall, there is probably little risk of American isolationism or withdrawal from the Mediterranean in political and security terms. But the new style of engagement may be far more unilateral than that of its predecessor.

## Traditional Interests, New Mental Maps

The US has always had an implicit rather than explicit Mediterranean strategy, and this is unlikely to change in the Trump Administration. Unlike its Euro-

<sup>2</sup> Questions of religious freedom may be an exception. It is notable that when Secretary of State Tillerson made his first, brief visit to Turkey, his agenda included a visit with the spouse of an imprisoned American missionary.

<sup>3</sup> See Jeffrey GOLDBERG, "The Obama Doctrine," *The Atlantic*, April 2016.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Michael MANDELBAUM, "Foreign Policy as Social Work," *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 1996.

pean partners, Washington has rarely thought in terms of Mediterranean policy per se. Intellectually and bureaucratically, the Mediterranean hardly figures as a unified geopolitical space in American foreign policy. Europe, including southern Europe, and the Middle East and North Africa, are distinct spheres in the American policy debate. This distinction is most apparent in the State Department, and somewhat less so within the military commands, where areas of responsibility in EUCOM and AFRI-COM, in particular, span both shores of the Mediterranean. Despite its growing relevance in a Middle Eastern context, Turkey, as a NATO ally, has generally been treated as a European partner. The Trump Administration reportedly planned to shift Turkey to the Middle East and North Africa, at least within the National Security Council where portfolios are more flexible. This is unlikely to be well received in Ankara, or the State Department, and the plan has been shelved.

Even if the US has had a “recessed” approach to the Mediterranean in recent decades, it has had some clear policy interests, especially in security terms. These have proven durable, even if the relative weight of these interests has evolved over time. This balance is likely to evolve further with a new administration in Washington. First, the US has long been interested in the Mediterranean as a facet of the European security environment. During the Cold War, this was driven by the diplomatic and military competition with Moscow. Elements of this competition are coming back on the American agenda, especially in the eastern Mediterranean, in Syria, Libya, and potentially in Egypt and Algeria. More significantly, the new administration tends to view security risks emanating from the South, including migration, terrorism, and the foreign fighter problem, as a central challenge for European security. The traditionally limited attention to these more diffuse Mediterranean risks in NATO strategy is roughly what President Trump had in mind when he accused the Alliance of being “obsolete” on the campaign trail. The administration has since moved away from this discourse, driven in some measure by the evident interest in bolstering counter-terrorism cooperation within NATO (and between NATO and the EU). One exception to this pattern may be seen in the Balkans, where the Trump Administration may be less active in supporting the consolida-

tion of democratic politics and stability in a region where the EU is seen as the natural leader. Similarly, the Trump Administration has signalled that while it is concerned about Libya as a terrorist stronghold, managing the crisis in Libya is clearly a European responsibility.

Less a security concern, but still relevant to stability, is the outlook for American policy toward southern Europe as part of the EU economic and political equation. The Trump Administration has moved away from its initial very critical statements about the value of the “European project,” as Americans like to describe it. But interest in the EU itself remains tepid, and it is unclear whether the new administration will be willing to make the geopolitical case for a more supportive approach to economic recovery in southern Europe. The Obama Administration was notably critical of unfettered austerity, and quietly pressed key EU allies to consider debt relief for Greece. The Trump Administration, by contrast, has signalled its unwillingness to see IMF resources applied to the Greek case.

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Second, the US will continue to view the Mediterranean as a critical link to adjacent places of strategic importance, including Sub-Saharan Africa, the Black Sea and the Gulf. The use of air and naval bases around southern Europe, North Africa and the Levant, and secure access to the Suez Canal in order to shift forces rapidly from the Atlantic and the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean give Washington a structural interest in stable defence partnerships around the region. Within this frame, however, there are likely to be some subtle shifts. Morocco is likely to emerge as an increasingly important partner for security looking south to the Sahel and West Africa. The Obama Administration, while broadly supportive of Rabat, had some ambivalence about the

Western Sahara issue. The Trump Administration, by contrast, is likely to take a dim view of the Polisario, Algeria's non-aligned worldview, and the risks posed by ungoverned spaces.

Counter-terrorism, the security of the Suez Canal, and Israeli security will likely drive relations with Egypt. Questions about Turkish stability and persistent policy differences may reinforce longstanding concerns about the use of the Incirlik airbase, despite its proximity to ongoing operations against the Islamic State. Alternative bases in Romania and at Souda Bay in Greece may acquire additional importance as part of a portfolio approach to power projection in the eastern Mediterranean and the Black Sea. Or, Washington may simply choose to bolster its standing naval presence in the Mediterranean, a presence that has declined sharply in recent decades. This over-the-horizon approach also applies to theatre missile defence, largely based afloat in the Mediterranean, even if oriented largely toward risks emanating from the Gulf.

Third, the Mediterranean will continue to demand a considerable amount of official attention in Washington given the sheer number of crises and flashpoints around the region. The new administration, and Congress, may have little taste for sustained military intervention ("boots on the ground") or expensive reconstruction efforts in Syria or Libya. And other flashpoints in the Balkans and Maghreb may be seen as places for European leadership. But this does not mean that the US will be diplomatically or militarily disengaged. Again, the more pressing question for Mediterranean partners is the form of this engagement and, in particular, how unilateral it will be. On some fronts, the new administration may demonstrate a surprising degree of activism. Many observers were surprised by the apparent readiness of candidate Trump to re-engage on the stalled Middle East Peace Process. In office, President Trump has suggested that his policy might not be tied to the pursuit of a two-state solution, and that he could be supportive of any approach the parties themselves would support. It is unclear what this would mean in practice, and whether an administration that has been so outspoken in support of Israel could also garner credibility with the Palestinians. That said, the goal of a comprehensive settlement remains the ultimate diplomatic prize for any American administra-

tion, and the Trump Administration would not be the first to engage heavily in the peace process, even against the odds.

It is worth underscoring, again, the prevailing intellectual and bureaucratic fragmentation in the American approach to the Mediterranean. American strategy toward the region tends to be the sum of multiple regional policy decisions, spanning southern Europe, the Middle East and North Africa and areas further afield. In this setting, senior officials below the level of cabinet rank, including US ambassadors around the region, can play a key role in shaping policy. The new administration has been unusually slow in filling these positions. Until these positions are filled (and most will be political appointments) the direction of America's Mediterranean policies will be difficult to know in detail.

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In the meantime, some questions will be unavoidable, not least the pressing challenge of relations with Turkey. These relations have never been easy to manage, bilaterally or in a NATO context. But recent developments in and around Turkey cast these critical but troubled relations in sharp relief. The Trump Administration is likely to place practical considerations of defence cooperation above differences over Turkey's sharply declining democracy or media freedom. Ankara has been hopeful that Washington may now be more inclined to resolve the two most prominent issues on the bilateral agenda: Turkey's request for the extradition of Fethullah Gulen (the US-based cleric alleged to have played a key role in the failed military coup of 15 July, 2016); and continued American backing for the YPG, a Kurdish militia battling IS in Syria. Washington may indeed be sympathetic to the extradition request, but it remains doubtful that US courts will agree given the difficulty of ensuring a fair trial for Gulen in Turkey. This remains a legal rather than a political question. On

support to the YPG in Syria, Washington is most unlikely to yield to Turkish requests, as the US military has built a close working relationship with Kurdish forces, and they have proven very effective in the field. President Erdogan's May 2017 visit to Washington yielded little on this front, or the Gulen question, beyond vague assurances that the US has Turkish security concerns in mind. Moreover, the deterioration of political and economic conditions in Turkey makes it more difficult to envision any major new animating projects for the bilateral relationship. Washington's traditionally strong support for Turkey's EU accession process has been rendered essentially irrelevant by the complete impasse in Turkey-EU relations, and presumably, Washington's lack of interest in EU enlargement.

### Addressing Durable Chaos

The new American administration brings somewhat different goals and discourse to the Mediterranean agenda. But it also confronts a very different strategic environment. Looming risks elsewhere, with Russia in the East, and with China and North Korea in the Asia-Pacific region, could transform the global equation overnight and lead to a rapid shift away from "optional" problems on Europe's southern periphery. Even short of this, the prospect of open-ended conflicts and disintegration in the Levant and parts of the Maghreb suggest a future that has less to do with crisis management in the traditional sense, and more about hedging in the face of long-term insecurity – living with durable chaos. This may align with the strain of American strategic thinking that regards many regional problems as simply "too tough to fix." It is more difficult to reconcile with the American impetus to devote considerable energy and resources in the service of practical solutions, often in the service of values, or simply order. The Trump Administration may incline toward a cautious approach, but it will not be immune to these traditional impulses, as the use of force in Syria illustrates.

### A Net Assessment

Several months into the Trump Administration, it is unclear that there has been a real movement away from the revolutionary impulses and strident rhetoric of earlier days. Some traditional policy directions have been reaffirmed. But the style of the new administration remains markedly different from its predecessors, and its approach to global, multilateral questions will be vexing to allies and others. President Trump's withdrawal from the Paris climate agreement is a dramatic illustration. A more closely measured, interests-based approach prevails, and on this basis there will be no shortage of Mediterranean issues compelling the attention of American policymakers.

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Whether an unpopular American president can mobilize international partners in support of these interests is very unclear. The essential lines of American strategy and engagement are likely to endure, with some notable shifts, broadly in the direction of hard over soft power instruments. Overall, isolationism is simply not an option, and from a broad foreign policy perspective, the key question is not whether the US will be active – it will be – but whether this activism, and the strategy behind it, will be pursued in a more unilateral way. In a Mediterranean setting, the US can be expected to maintain, or even reinforce, its presence in critical areas such as the eastern Mediterranean. Elsewhere, in the Balkans and the Maghreb, Washington will surely expect European partners to take the lead in political and security terms, a preference that long predates the advent of the Trump Administration.