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An Echo of Ronald Reagan

By Matt A. Mayer

With President-elect Donald Trump just days away from being sworn in as president of the United States of America, many people in America and across the world seek insights into his foreign policy. While we won't know the exact contours of Trump's policies, we can glean likely aspects of it from his past actions and statements.

Broadly speaking, as [Victor Davis Hanson noted](#), Trump appears to see the world through a Hobbesian lens. This realist view that our world is in fact "nasty, brutish and short" does not mean that Trump won't aspire to what Abraham Lincoln termed as "the better angels of our nature" in his first inaugural address. It simply means Trump knows our world contains evil people who seek to harm others whether as petty criminals or despots of foreign nations. It also means he understands other foreign leaders are in it to win, just like him.

President Trump's foreign policy likely will merge Theodore Roosevelt's motto to "talk softly and carry a big stick" with Ronald Reagan's straight talk of "peace through strength" in his battle with the "evil empire." The Trump version will be to "talk bluntly and carry a yuge – probably the biggest ever wielded by a president – stick."

An incoming president's foreign policy can be a reaction to his predecessor's policy. Barack Obama's "lead from behind" strategy came in response to George W. Bush's muscular "with us or against us" mentality after the 9/11 attack, which itself followed Bill Clinton's cashing out of the Reagan peace dividend. Due to his nonpartisan approach, Trump's foreign policy comes in reaction to what he sees as 24 years of foreign policy failures.

Specifically, Trump has remarked on Obama's ineffective and weak policies, Bush's recklessness and nation building policies and Clinton's failure to deal with the rise of Islamic jihadists. As a result, I'd submit that a Trumpian foreign policy will contain four constants. First, it will put America on permanent offense. Trump's modus operandi is to take control of his environments and keep his opponents on defense. Whether through a strategically timed event or a seemingly ill-timed tweet, Trump is a master at dictating what we are talking about.

In the foreign policy arena, Trump will actively "mow the grass" when it comes to terrorists and the areas in which they operate, but don't expect him to get mired in the Middle East. He also will move aggressively to frame the debates with foreign governments. It is not naivete when Trump states that Mexico will pay for a wall on the southern U.S. border or warmongering with China when he takes a call from the president of Taiwan. It is Trump putting America on offense and its opponents on defense.

It also is the first move in the second aspect of a Trumpian foreign policy: namely, hard-nose negotiating. Trump didn't rise in the world of New York City real estate by getting out-hustled or manhandled. Like Reagan's years heading the Screen Actors Guild and its negotiations with the unions, Trump learned the art of negotiating in one of the toughest businesses in one of the most cutthroat cities in the world – if he could make it there, he can make it anywhere.

Trump knows he won't always get what he wants, but he knows not to negotiate against himself by giving up territory out of the gate. He can always move towards the positions of his opponents, but he knows he can't move back from his opening positions. Contractors who did business with Trump quickly learned that the contract merely set the goalposts within which Trump would negotiate a better deal if performance didn't meet his expectations. Foreign governments should heed these lessons.

The third aspect of a Trumpian foreign policy will be inherent unpredictability. While diplomats and foreign policy gurus love Westphalian predictability, Trump appears to relish keeping allies and enemies off-balance. Does Trump believe in the value of NATO? It depends. At the current cost to the U.S. when other members fail to pay their fair share, perhaps not, but maybe once all members meet their financial obligations. Will Trump recognize Taiwan's independence? Probably not, but making the Chinese nervous that he might could help Trump secure a better trade deal with China or get China's help with North Korea. Is Trump being gullible when it comes to Vladimir Putin? He could be, but he knows Russia isn't an existential threat to the U.S. like the Soviet Union was and he knows he needs Putin to help keep a lid on the Middle East, especially with Iran.

The last aspect is Trump's belief in the importance of getting returns on investments. As a businessman, nothing matters more than the bottom line. If an investment fails to produce a positive return, it is a loss. A good dealmaker will have more wins than losses. In foreign policy, this means that institutions and trade agreements must provide positive returns for America or Trump will seek to undermine, vacate or obviate those entities.

For example, Trump views NAFTA as a bad deal for workers so he wants to renegotiate it to provide greater value to Americans. Other entities ripe for Trump to view

as net negatives for the U.S. include the European Union, the United Nations, the various trade organizations and other supranational groups. Historically, our enemies and opponents have used these groups to throw obstacles in front of the U.S., to lesson our security and to weaken or attack our businesses. Don't be surprised if Trump targets those entities that he believes harm U.S. interests.

One final note of caution: Don't underestimate Trump. The road from June 2015 to today is littered with politicians, pundits and prognosticators who dismissed him as a simpleton way in over his head. In an echo to how the media and world elite treated Reagan, [this recent op-ed by Philip Stephens from the UK's Financial Times](#) is a great example of defining Trump as the cliché created by left-wing talking heads and liberal democrats or as a mere product of angry white men.

Less than a year after he left office and contrary to the "experts," the Berlin Wall that Reagan urged Mikhail Gorbachev to tear down fell and just three years later the Soviet Union was on Reagan's "ash heap of history." Those who dismissed Reagan as nothing more than an amiable dunce had to re-evaluate their assessments of him. Similarly, those quick to paint Trump as a lightweight may find themselves resting on the beach like Jeb Bush or wandering the woods like Hillary Clinton.

The reality is that Obama entered office with little experience, but high expectations. He leaves office with a world in far worse shape than what he inherited from Bush. In contrast, Trump enters office with lots of experience, but very low expectations, which is exactly how he probably wants it to be. Trump can only do better than what the "experts" expect. So, you see, he is already winning.

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