

# IRMO BRIEF

**08**  
2016

## United States After the Presidential Election 2016: Continuation or Abandonment of Obama's Foreign Policy

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### Introduction

With the Presidential Elections coming closer, the global attention is shifting more and more to the United States. During the terms of George W. Bush, especially during his second tenure, the image of the US as an untouchable superpower was somewhat mitigated. In 2001 the US witnessed the largest attack on its territory since Pearl Harbor and military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq took a heavy toll in human lives and material and financial expanses. Upon this, the campaign in Iraq had no legal foundation, and that caused a rift with the European allies, especially with two big continental powers Germany and France, and the consequences are still largely felt to date. The legitimacy and the credibility of the US as the global strong leader was further watered down with the financial crunch originating on Wall Street, spilling over to the rest of the world, especially the European Union (EU).

At the moment when American image and credibility hit the ground, the White House saw a new president Barack Obama, the first African American to sit in the Oval Office. In the internal policy, Obama's two terms saw the American economy gaining an undisputed strength. Unemployment rate and deficit were cut in half, exports and the dollar were on the hike, just like the GDP growth and the real estate market. Obama's foreign policy showed to be much more diplomatic and arguably more efficient than that of the Bush administration.

The Obama administration has decided to curb Russian ambition to sprawl their influence in Europe. The US strongly supported the Ukrainian cause and the Russians now have control of less than 5% of the country they so eagerly want to snatch out of the Euro-Atlantic sphere of interest. Russia will uphold control over Crimea and continue

supporting the road to independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, meaning that Ukraine and Georgia have a sluggish prospect of joining NATO. Still, Obama has been determined to make the North Atlantic Alliance strong again and to push for NATO enlargement as the tiny Mediterranean ex-Yugoslav Republic of Montenegro will likely join NATO soon.

The US under Obama did not meddle extensively in the Middle East, and American involvement reached its peak with the limited aerial support to the Iraqi troops against the Islamic State (IS) launched early in 2014. Obama also brought a thaw to American relations with Cuba, after half of century of isolation of this Caribbean nation, and to Iran, with sanctions being lifted to this energy resources rich country after 36 years.

### **Challenges ahead of Obama's successor**

Obama's legacy, both internally and externally is no doubt, vast and lasting, but his successor will have a tough challenge ahead. In 2016 the US still seems to be the dominating power in the world in terms of economic, military and political strength and influence. The EU is trembling and the future of the block is uncertain after the referendum in the United Kingdom and the looming Brexit, while the continent is battered with frequent and massive terrorist attacks. Russia's economy is shrinking due to the declining oil and gas prices and to the economic sanctions to a lesser extent. China, the world's second largest economy is still growing rapidly, but the pace of growth is slowest ever since 2009. The Middle East, from Turkey to the Persian Gulf is facing conflicts and instability.

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With much of the world engulfed in insecurity, the new US president from January 2017 onwards will face many challenges. The eyes of the world are now pointing to the two presidential candidates, the Democrat Hillary Rodham Clinton, and the Republican Donald John Trump. Whether Clinton or Trump wins, the new president will become the most powerful person in the world, and the foreign policy their respective administrations take will have an effect on the future of the whole international community.

### **Clinton and Trump – two candidates with completely different backgrounds**

It might be said that the US has never seen a more dramatic difference between the two candidates taking to the final stage of competition for the White House. Hillary Clinton is a well experienced politician with decades of political engagement under different US administrations. Clinton's political activity dates back to the sixties, to the days when she majored in political science. Back in 1974 Clinton was one of the key figures in creating procedure to impeach President Richard Nixon.

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Clinton was the First Lady of the United States in role from 1993 to 2001 and she was also the US senator for eight years, as well as Secretary of State from 2009 to 2013. Clinton made all of her career in politics and very close or even within the White House. Clinton knows the ways and means of Washington's policies to the core, and according to her political resume, a person with more experience and knowledge within the US administration could be hardly found in the US capital.

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Donald Trump could not be more different from Hillary Clinton, standing at the opposite side to her. Trump is not a career politician but rather a businessman and media personality and he is lacking experience in the international affairs and US foreign policy. He comes from a different background and he is an outsider in Washington and the US politics, while his understanding of global issues seems inadequate. The mere overview of the two

candidates shows how different they are and what a dramatic effect the election of one or the other candidate to the Oval Office will have on the US foreign policy, as the president determines its course fully.

### **Key differences between Clinton and Trump on key issues of US foreign policy**

If Hillary Clinton is elected US president, it seems that she would fully continue to lead the policy of the incumbent President Obama. On the other hand, election of Donald Trump might bring a breaking point on much of what has been done during the Obama administration. In fact, it can be said that Trump as president would dissolve much of the Obama's foreign policy legacy, especially in three key geostrategic areas.

#### **Europe**

President Barack Obama was a resolute advocate of a strong Trans-Atlantic alliance by all means, supporting the stronger European integration and continuation of EU enlargement process. President Obama also pledged to Britons to vote to remain in the EU. Hillary Clinton would, no doubt, seek to preserve American influence in Europe. In order to do so, the US has to support the mere existence of the EU, even in a different form as the current model of European integration is in crisis. Further to this, the US needs its key ally in Europe, the United Kingdom, to stay in Europe, not on the brim of Europe.

*Another threat to the American interests might be a new Franco-German axis seeking stronger bonds with Moscow, which could be perilous for the national security of the US. Hillary Clinton will undoubtedly try to keep the British in and the Russians out of Europe, while curbing French and especially German ambitions to become a new European hegemon.*

Hillary Clinton as the US president might want to slow down the pace of Brexit while seeking the solution for Britain's European future. The destiny of the UK in Europe, and the future of the EU itself to that matter is not clear at the moment. If EU's functional problems multiply and the British do leave the EU, which seems inevitable given the outcome of the referendum, the American influence in Europe might be scorned. Another threat to the American interests might be a new Franco-German axis seeking stronger bonds with Moscow, which could be perilous for the national security of the US. Hillary Clinton will undoubtedly try to keep the British in and the Russians out of Europe, while curbing French and especially German ambitions to become a new European hegemon.

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On the other hand, Donald Trump has repeatedly reiterated his idea of transformation or even of dissolving EU. He was a strong advocate of Brexit and during the referendum campaign his rhetoric resolved to the one of Nigel Farage of Boris Johnson, two most prominent Brexiters. Before the UK referendum Trump landed to Scotland, claiming that Brexit would boost his golf course project. It seems that Donald Trump is not fully aware of the vitality the EU has for the interests of the US and the effects for the US national security if the Trans-Atlantic partnership is severed. Unlike Obama who strongly pushed for Transatlantic - Trade - and - Investment - Partnership (TTIP) and Clinton who wants the deal with the Europeans concluded, Trump is campaigning against TTIP, squabbling that it will outsource American jobs to Europe and consequently strike a blow to the American economy in midst of harsh global competition.

### **NATO and Russia**

Relations with Russia and boosting security in Eastern Europe through stronger cooperation of NATO member states were among top national security priorities of the Obama administration. Europe proved to be weak and rather divided on how to curb Russian support to the rebels in Ukraine, balancing between policy of appeasement of Russian president Vladimir Putin and demonstrating unity at the face of the threat in the East. Obama was on the other hand very diplomatic comparing to nationalistic rhetoric in Russia, but also quite resolute in flaunting the economic and military strength of the US. American support to Ukraine was abundant and concrete, and the Americans were enticing the Europeans to be persistent with imposing sanctions to Russia.

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The US also launched its energy strategy including exporting the shale gas to Europe and restarted oil exports after 40 years, and that largely contributed to oil glut in the market and subsequent plummeting oil prices. Within a year and a half after the Russian annexation of Crimea, oil prices plunged from 140 to just 30 USD per barrel. The cumulative effect of low oil prices and imposed sanctions have a devastating effect on Russian economy. NATO also held its summit and a big military exercise in Poland, by no means incidentally as Poland borders Russian Kaliningrad Oblast and its pro-American orientation irks Putin. Hillary Clinton made it quite clear that she as US president would not restrain from Obama's policy to Russia. Clinton called Putin 'an autocrat in Kremlin' and it is quite obvious that she would step up NATO and American military build-up in Eastern Europe, embracing Montenegro, a Balkan country with traditionally strong bonds with Russia, and possibly other newcomers to NATO membership.

Donald Trump's stance to Putin and Russia is diametrically different. Trump praises Putin's rule of Russia and in return the Kremlin openly supports Trump's ambitions to become the US president. Trump has been a longtime

supporter of Putin and he also had interest to invest in Russian real estate market. It seems that Trump's stance on Russia is purely pragmatic and business oriented, disrespecting of the Russian involvement in frozen conflicts on Russian periphery, including Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova and in the Caucasus. The US under Trump would probably lift sanctions imposed to Russia and seek to get back to business as usual, in a move aiming to appease Putin.

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Trump also approved Russia's annexation of Crimea even though the US is one of the signatories of the Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurance which was concluded back in 1994 to protect territorial integrity of Ukraine, among others. Such policy toward Russia might serve as a green light to a more assertive Russian foreign policy and undermine NATO cohesion, as new member states in the East of Europe would feel confused, even abandoned by the US, left to deal on their own with their big eastern neighbor. This has become more evident with Trump's ideas of pulling out of the article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty by stating that the US would only defend NATO member states which fulfill their obligations to the US. These statements have a perilous meaning for NATO especially at the moment when Turkey ponders leaving the EU accession talks and even questions its NATO membership.

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The US is by far the strongest NATO member and one of the few member states contributing more than 2% of its budget to the military, while big European countries feel more reluctant to their NATO commitments. With the US under Trump, NATO's ambitions to foster the Alliance would be mitigated just like the US policy of curbing Russia's meddling in European matters would be watered down. Trump's stance on the EU, Brexit and the TTIP would also boost Russian opposition to EU enlargement, and at the same time foster the expansion of Euro-Asian Union controlled by Moscow.

### **The Middle East**

The American foreign policy traditionally has special interests and relations with countries in the Middle East. Turkey is the key American partner in the region, as the country has a key geostrategic location, and it is also a second strongest military force of NATO. Saudi Arabia and Israel also tender special relations with the US. President Obama was particularly cautious to this region, after the trauma that was caused by the American military intervention in Iraq.

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Recent years saw the rise of the IS which poses a threat not just to the Middle East, but globally. Obama's administration refused extensive involvement in the region and restricted the US intervention to aerial strikes against the IS, while pertaining its demand to topple the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Hillary Clinton's stance to the Middle East is mostly in line with Obama's policy or even more assertive. Clinton would persist on US intention to topple Bashar al-Assad, but with no significant increase of the American military presence in the region, and she would try to bash the IS the same way, avoiding direct military involvement of the US and rather supporting the local rivals of the terrorist organization.

Donald Trump, on contrary, would not undermine the regime of the Syrian president or try to topple him by any means. Bashar al-Assad has close ties with Russian President Putin and it seems that Trump does not object to the Syrian President staying in power. It is also likely that Trump would seek to boost American military build-up in the region and take a more aggressive action to eradicate the IS.

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Further to this, Donald Trump's statements on banning Muslims from entering into the US provoked an outrage in the Muslim world. Some

of the key American allies are Muslim countries and 'an anti-Muslim president' would certainly cause deterioration of relations with these countries and with over 1.7 adherents of Islam globally. Trump's statements on Muslims, apart from being politically and morally incorrect, could also undermine the image of America as a bastion of freedom and liberal democracy and thwart relations with Muslim countries and followers of the second most spread world religion.

## Conclusion

Hillary Clinton and Donald Trumps have diametrically opposing stances on both domestic and foreign policy issues. By analyzing Clinton's stance on a number of key American foreign policy positions, it is evident that her tenure at the White House would quite adamantly represent the continuation of Obama's foreign policy. Apart from that, Hillary Clinton has an extensive experience in US foreign policy and it seems as her natural environment. These all would add to a smooth transition of power in the White House, and her presidency would bring no shock or surprise after the Obama presidency to either allies or rivals anywhere in the world. On the other hand, Donald Trump's seems to lack a finesse required from the most significant creator of US

foreign policy, and his statements seem to be quite populist. Trump lacks experience in international affairs and it is questionable how he would handle international issues at the helm of the world's biggest political, economic and military power. Upon this, it seems that his tenure at the White House would abandon much of the Obama administration legacy, and it is not quite clear which course the US foreign policy would take in 2017 with him as the US president. Such uncertainty would make US allies worldwide feel unpleasant and the rest of the international community even more puzzled. Upon this, the American partners in Europe fear that Trump's term would bring isolationism to US foreign policy, leaving them to deal on their own with challenges like growing Russian assertiveness and rising terror threat. On the other hand, Trump has proved to be rather unpredictable on his foreign policy stances. His term would for sure bring a new impulse to the White House and a new era in American foreign policy, with less dedication to involvement overseas and more focus on economic growth and harvesting trade ties with the rest of the world.

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