



Donald J. Trump and foreign policy: a little less reaction, a little more observation please.¹

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On the 9th of November 2016, Republican candidate Donald J. Trump was elected President of the United States. What struck me during this election was the way the media² succumbed to (and generated) panic. Interestingly, Trump and the media industry benefited from one another. Time and again, they [media] demonized the Republican candidate in order to reach a buzz (the issue of knowing if they were right or wrong to do so is not the point here), thus serving Trump's campaign and themselves³. While panicking is always easy, I would argue that "wait and see" should be the motto for now.

First, there is always a form of path dependency in politics: one cannot fully depart from what has

been built in the past. Of course radical discourses like those uttered by Trump can be frightening (especially with regards to his domestic policy programme), yet nobody knows if he will follow the course of action he advertised during his campaign. Indeed, his declarations might have been a ploy to attract part of the voters. Obviously, the character of the man can put one in distress, yet I would argue that it is not a case for going into total panic. Even if Trump were to reveal himself as a mad man, western society is not what it used to be, we have evolved, we have institutions to put into check wrong and deviant behaviours (protests – either American or international – against the war in Vietnam, the Watergate scandal, the engagement in Iraq or the NSA programs are only a few examples of what can be done). In worst cases scenarios, checks and balances, impeachment procedures and international sanctions still exist. The Third World War is not knocking at our doorstep, there is still hope, even with Trump in power.

Second, the acceptance speech given by the President elect was tainted with a note of openness to both sides of the aisle and to the world – signalling he might have de-

cidated to follow his ghost writer and his advisors this time around. Linked to the aforementioned element of path dependency, the acceptance speech held many references to the Manifest Destiny⁴, a concept at the core of the American foreign policy – and American politics – that has stood the test of time: "[...] *Working together we will begin the urgent task of rebuilding our nation and renewing the American dream [...] At the same time we will get along with all other nations willing to get along with us [...] I want to tell the world community that while we will always put America's interests first we will deal fairly with everyone - All people and all other nations. We will seek common ground not hostility, partnership not conflict [...]*"⁵. Thus Trump seems to be changing his approach to the role of President of the United States. Maybe, if he surrounds himself with experienced advisors we could be pleasantly surprised by his presidency.

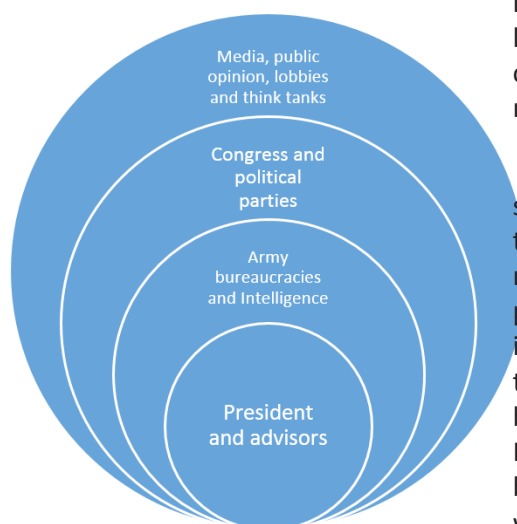
Undoubtedly, much has been said on Trump, specifically on his inexperience. Did we not see that once already? A bit over thirty years ago, the United States elected a President who used to be an actor, Ronald Reagan. Interestingly enough, he was

¹ This article is a comment to the thought provoking interview of Professor Tanguy Struye (UCL) - in French: T. STRUYE DE SWIELANDE, "Et maintenant, que doit-on craindre?", L'Echo, <http://tinyurl.com/pjjju47>, 9th November 2016.

one of the orchestrator of the end of the Cold War.

Moreover, since George Herbert Walker Bush, none of the Presidents have shown a natural or professional proclivity towards American foreign policy and all consequently decided to surround themselves with skilled advisors. Before reaching the presidency in 1989, Bush Sr. was in turn, Ambassador to the United Nation under Richard Nixon (1971-1973), the United States' Envoy to China under Gerald Ford (1974-1975), the Director of Central Intelligence (1976-1977), and Vice-President under Ronald Reagan (1981-1989). Bill Clinton, George Walker Bush and Barack Obama all arrived at the White House as novices in the arcane of foreign policy⁶. Hence, if Donald Trump encircles himself with well-advised people, the future administration might have an interesting foreign policy programme (either more interventionist or isolationist, only time will say).

Furthermore, when it comes to decision-making in foreign policy, one should take into account the *concentric circles of power*⁷:



These variables will bear an impact – to various degrees – on the decision-making process of Trump in terms of foreign policy. Hence, it is only when Donald Trump will have chosen his advisors (especially his Secretary of State, Secretary of De-

fence and National Security Advisor) that one will be able to see where the foreign policy of the United States is headed. Let's not forget that the personality of the President elect, known to be unpredictable (having said everything and its contrary during his campaign)⁸, will also play a key role in Washington's policies. Additionally, as Tanguy Struye de Swielande notes: *"Each policy, each decision, relies on a unique institutional structure according to the participating actors, the issues, the stakes, the risks, the costs etc"*⁹, underlining the fact that the President will have to compose with a large number of contextual factors that remain unknown.

Third, in terms of foreign policy and geopolitics, even if Trump turns towards a more isolationist policy (as argued by Professor Struye¹⁰), it does not necessarily mean that the U.S. will not act on the international scene. China is developing its "go game" on the world chessboard and is slowly trying to isolate the United States in order to be the first world power by 2049¹¹. This Chinese objective geopolitically depends on a good understanding with Russia. If Russia were to get closer to the United States (since Trump thinks Putin is *"doing a great job"*¹²), this new relation could hinder Beijing's endeavours and keep Washington on the map as the first and only superpower.

Fourth, on the subject of Russia, an alliance or rapprochement between Washington and Moscow – I do not think Trump will not be the puppet of Putin especially if the former is well-advised – could be beneficial to NATO and rekindle the dialogue between the organization and the Kremlin. Some have said that a new bond between the U.S. and Russia would not be advantageous for the E.U., Trump seeming less inclined to help Europe (mainly on the Ukrainian issue). Yet, it might be *the* transformational and crucial moment awaited by the E.U. to spread its wings on the international scene through the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) and the European Union Ex-

ternal Action (EUEA).

In the end, this is what I retain from the election: a lot has been said in the media, and for what? Not much. Clinton or Trump, presidents are subject to change: nothing is set in stone. It is only in the light of time and History that one can correctly assess a situation, an election, a mandate. Even if Hillary Clinton were in his stead, she was known to be against several of the Obama administration policies. Maybe Secretary Clinton would have totally departed from the *leading from behind* doctrine, who knows?

One thing is sure, Trump was able to harness the power of a lower middle class living off small jobs, who felt hopeless and in distress in the light of the economic crisis. He is a symbol of the anti-establishment movement (although he seems to be a part of it himself at times). Yet, one thing puzzled me throughout election day: the way social media users of the Western World reacted. A large portion of people tended to react radically to this election day, with expressions such as "America you f***** up". However, we should tread lightly. Indeed, this anti-establishment movement tends to develop itself not only in the United States, but also in Europe (with the Brexit and/or anti-establishment/Euro-sceptic movements – like the *Cinque Stelle* in Italy, Austria's *Freedom Party*, the *Front National* in France, the *Sweden Democrats*, and so on).

Instead of panicking, one should observe, one should observe and wait, wait to see how things are going to unfold across the Atlantic, after all, this is just an election, nothing more, nothing less. The Trump Administration still has to take form and its advisors will be of utmost importance. Nevertheless, the White House will have to compose with a number of variables changing according to both domestic and international contexts. One fact is clear: the election of Donald J. Trump as the 45th President of the United States

will bring international change – positive or negative, only time will tell.

(ENDNOTES)

1 This article is a comment to the thought provoking interview of Professor Tanguy Struye (UCL) - in French: T. STRUYE DE SWIELANDE, “Et maintenant, que doit-on craindre?”, L’Echo, <http://tinyurl.com/pjjju47>, 9th November 2016.

2 Television, radio, newspapers but especially social media.

3 M. JORDAN, “Victoire de Trump. La faute aux médias?”, *Courrier International*, <http://tinyurl.com/plco6nc>, 9th November 2016.

4 The Manifest Destiny defines the American exceptionalism that has endured since the settlement of the first colonies, it is engraved in its national DNA: “*The United States believes to be the incarnation of a of a political truth [...] when the planet will obey to the great principle of the American democracy, peace will be universal and definitive*”. Freely translated. Quoted in: T. STRUYE DE SWIELANDE, *La politique étrangère de l’administration Bush : analyse de la prise de décision*, Bruxelles : Peter Lang, 2007, Coll. “Géopolitique et résolution des conflits”, pp. 28-29.

5 “Transcript: Donald Trump’s Victory Speech”, *The New York Times*, <http://tinyurl.com/q5jrxxq>, 9th November 2016.

6 For further information : C.P. DAVID, *Au Sein de la Maison-Blanche*, 3^e édition, Paris : Presses de Science Po, 2015, 1182 p.

7 Tanguy STRUYE DE SWIELANDE, *La politique étrangère de l’administration Bush : analyse de la prise de décision*, *op.cit.*, p.34. Freely translated.

8 M.L. ALDERMAN, H. SCHWEITZER, “Donald Trump’s Incoherent Positions Are Part of His Master Plan”, *Fortune*, 13th of May 2016.

Tanguy STRUYE DE SWIELANDE, “Et maintenant, que doit-on craindre?”, L’Echo, <http://tinyurl.com/pjjju47>, 9th November 2016.

9 Tanguy STRUYE DE SWIELANDE, *La politique étrangère de l’administration Bush : analyse de la prise de décision*, *op.cit.*, pp.33-34. Freely Translated.

10 Tanguy STRUYE DE SWIELANDE, “Et maintenant, que doit-on

craindre?”, L’Echo, <http://tinyurl.com/pjjju47>, 9th November 2016.

11 For further information : T. STRUYE DE SWIELANDE, *Duel entre l’Aigle et le Dragon pour le leadership mondial*, Bruxelles : Peter Lang, Coll. « Géopolitique et résolution des conflits », 2015, 276 p.

12 J. DIAMOND, “Timeline: Donald Trump’s praise for Vladimir Putin”, *CNN*, <http://tinyurl.com/p8s6fsd>, 29th July 2016.

