

Big foreign issues ignored by Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump



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You wouldn't know it from the US presidential campaigns but the first serious crisis to face our new president most likely will be international. The list of possibilities is long — longer than it was eight years ago.

Here is the world the new president will inherit at noon on January 20 — a range of challenges for which neither candidate has offered new strategies or paths forward.

Every aspect of our relationship with China is becoming more challenging. In addition to Chinese cyberspying and theft of intellectual property, many US businesses in China are encountering an increasingly hostile environment. China's nationalist determination unilaterally to assert sovereignty over disputed waters and islands in the East and South China seas is steadily increasing the risk of military confrontation.

Most worrying, given their historic bad blood, escalation of a confrontation between China and Japan could be very dangerous. As a treaty partner of Japan, we would be obligated to help Tokyo. China intends to challenge the US for regional dominance in East Asia over the long term but the new president could quickly face a Chinese military challenge over disputed islands and freedom of navigation.

Dealing effectively with China requires a president with strategic acumen and vision, nuance, deft diplomatic and political skills, and sound instincts on when to challenge, when to stay silent and when to compromise or partner. On this most complex challenge, neither Hillary Clinton nor Donald Trump has said or done much to give anyone confidence. All we really know is Trump's intention to launch a trade war with a country holding over \$US1 trillion (\$1.3 trillion) in US debt and the largest market for many US companies; and

Clinton's opposition to the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement, which she helped to craft and the failure of which would hand China an easy political and economic win.

Then there is Vladimir Putin's Russia, now routinely challenging the US and its allies. How to count the ways? There was the armed seizure of Ukraine's Crimea; Moscow's military support of the separatist movement in eastern Ukraine; overt and covert intimidation of the Baltic states; the dispatch of fighter and bomber aircraft to avert the defeat of Syria's Bashar al-Assad; sales of sophisticated weaponry to Iran.

There is Russia's luring of the US Secretary of State into believing that a ceasefire in Syria is just around the corner — if only the US would do more, or less, depending on the issue; the cyber-attacks on the US, including possible attempts to influence the presidential election; and covert efforts to aggravate division and weakness within the European Union and inside European countries. And there is the dangerously close buzzing of US Navy ships in the Baltic Sea and close encounters with US military aircraft in international airspace.

The only thing longer than the list of hostile Russian actions abroad is the list of repressive actions inside Russia to stifle dissent and strengthen Putin's security services-run state. Putin will continue to behave aggressively until confronted and stopped. No one in the West wants a return to the Cold War, so the challenge is to confront and stop Putin's aggressions while pursuing co-operation on international challenges that can only be addressed successfully if Russia is at the table — from terrorism to climate change, from Syria to nuclear non-proliferation and arms control. Again, neither Clinton nor Trump has expressed any views on how they would deal with Putin (though Trump's expressions of admiration for the man and his authoritarian regime are naive and irresponsible).

North Korea and Iran are sworn enemies of the US.

North Korean potentate Kim Jong-un is building more nuclear weapons for his arsenal even as he develops ballistic missiles that now, or very soon, can reach all of our allies (and US military forces) in Asia. During the first term of the next president these missiles will be able to reach the US mainland.

On his good days, Kim appears to outsiders as a cartoonish megalomaniac; on his bad days, he seems to yearn for a Gotterdammerung finale in which a perishing North Korea takes a lot of Asians and Americans with it. Or is he simply continuing to pursue a strategy designed to preserve his rule and North Korea's independence through nuclear blackmail? The new US president could face an early provocation against the South, the Japanese or us, and for sure will be confronted by a long-term strategic nuclear threat to our allies and to America.

Regarding Iran, whatever value Barack Obama's nuclear agreement has brought, the deal has led to no decrease in Iran's aggressive meddling in the Middle East nor any lessening of its hostility to the US. Iranian naval challenges to US warship operations in the Persian Gulf have nearly doubled over the past year. Iran will do all it can to embarrass the US — such as allowing Russian planes to use Iranian airfields to attack the Syrian opposition and testing ballistic missiles — even as it strives to eject us from the entire region. Our new president

had best be prepared for an early test of US resolve in the Persian Gulf and Iran's continuing regional subversion.

While Clinton gave a speech on Iran over a year ago, she has since offered no inkling of her views and has said little about North Korea. Trump has said nary a word on the challenge posed by either country.

Both candidates have spelled out how they would deal with Islamic State, and terrorism more broadly, but their approach in essence sounds like what Obama is doing now — with more ideological fervour and some additional starch. Neither has addressed what the broader US strategy should be towards a Middle East in flames from Syria to Iraq to Libya, and where Gulf Arab states worry about their stability amid growing doubts they can rely on the US; where Egypt and Turkey are ruled by increasingly authoritarian strongmen, while the Israeli-Palestinian conflict seems further from resolution than ever.

Trump has suggested we should walk away from the region and hope for the best. This is a dangerous approach oblivious to the reality that what happens in the Middle East doesn't stay in the Middle East. Clinton has ruled out putting US ground troops in Iraq and Syria "ever again". That is a politically driven declaration of a sort no president (or candidate) should make, and it raises the question whether she would pull out the 5000 US troops now in Iraq. She has expressed no new ideas to deal with the boiling cauldron that is today's Middle East.

Each of these challenges may require the use of the American military. The president commands about two million men and women in uniform, and every previous president would attest that the decision to put those lives at risk is the weightiest burden of office. Yet neither candidate has seriously addressed what they think about the military, the use of military force or the criteria they would apply before sending that force into battle. Based on what each candidate has said and done, who can we trust with the lives of young Americans in uniform?

Both candidates have a credibility problem in foreign affairs. Clinton was the senior-most advocate for using the US military to bring ill-fated regime change in Libya and, further, failed to anticipate the chaos that would follow — the same failure she and other Democrats hung around the neck of the George W. Bush administration in post-Saddam Iraq. She was for trade agreements before she turned against them in this election campaign, just as she voted for the Iraq war in 2003 and then, several years later — in her first campaign for president — opposed the troop surge there. She has much-discussed credibility issues apart from national security, but these also influence foreign perceptions of reliability and trust.

When it comes to credibility problems, though, Trump is in a league of his own. He has - expressed support for building a wall between the US and Mexico; for torturing suspected terrorists and killing their families; for Putin's dictatorial leadership and for Saddam Hussein's non-existent successes against terrorism. He also has said he is for using defence spending by NATO allies as the litmus test on whether the US will keep its treaty

commitments to them; for withdrawing US troops from Europe, South Korea and Japan; and for the latter two developing nuclear weapons — a highly destabilising prospect.

Trump has been cavalier about the use of nuclear weapons. He has a record of insults to servicemen, their families and the military, which he called a “disaster”. He has declared our senior military leaders “reduced to rubble” and “embarrassing our country”, and has suggested that, if elected, he will purge them — an unprecedented and unconscionable threat. As of late, he appears to be rethinking some of these positions but he has yet to learn that when a president shoots off his mouth, there are no do-overs.

Trump is also wilfully ignorant about the rest of the world, about our military and its capabilities, and about government itself. He disdains expertise and experience while touting his own — such as his claim that he knows more about Islamic State than America’s generals. He has no clue about the difference between negotiating a business deal and negotiating with sovereign nations.

All of the presidents I served were strong personalities with strongly held views about the world. But each surrounded himself with independent-minded, knowledgeable and experienced advisers who would tell the president what he needed to hear, not what he wanted to hear. Sometimes presidents would take their advice, sometimes not. But they - always listened.

The world we confront is too perilous and too complex to have as president a man who believes he, and he alone, has all the answers and has no need to listen to anyone. In domestic affairs, there are many checks on what a president can do; in national security there are few constraints. A thin-skinned, temperamental, shoot-from-the-hip and lip, uninformed commander-in-chief is too great a risk for America.

I understand the broad anger and frustration against political leaders in both parties. I have written about my disgust as secretary of defence as I watched politicians repeatedly place re-election above the nation’s best interests. Polls make clear that most Americans are dissatisfied with the two major party candidates for president. But as I used to say in the Pentagon, we are where we are — not where we might wish to be. We have to make a decision. Perhaps the coming debates, if the candidates focus on substance rather than personal attacks, will clarify the choice.

Clinton has time before the election to address forthrightly her trustworthiness, to reassure people about her judgment, to demonstrate her willingness to stake out one or more positions on national security at odds with her party’s conventional wisdom, and to speak beyond generalities about how she would deal with China, Russia, North Korea, Iran, the Middle East — and international trade. Whether and how she addresses these issues will, I believe, affect how many people vote — including me.

At least on national security, I believe Trump is beyond repair. He is stubbornly uninformed about the world and how to lead our country and government, and temperamentally unsuited to leading our men and women in uniform. He is unqualified and unfit to be commander-in-chief.

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