

Trump 2.0: The Implications on Global Flashpoints

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Abstract

On 05 Nov 2024, the United States held its Presidential Elections, culminating in the election of Republican candidate Donald Trump and his running mate, James David Vance. With the Republican Party poised to gain a majority in both the Senate and the House of Representatives, the article explores the implications of this political shift, particularly on foreign policy and global conflict engagements. The focus is on two major flashpoints: the Russo-Ukrainian War and the Israel-Hamas conflict. In Ukraine, Trump's anti-war rhetoric and proposed peace strategies, as detailed in the article, align closely with Kremlin's demands, raising the possibility of a ceasefire and a negotiated settlement. Conversely, the Biden Administration's recent escalations, including the use of Army Tactical Missile System on Russian territory, have heightened tensions, leaving the situation volatile. In the Middle East, Trump's staunchly pro-Israel stance signals unwavering support for the Jewish state amidst its ongoing conflict with Hamas and the broader Axis of Resistance. However, his ability to mediate or influence outcomes remains uncertain due to deep-rooted hostilities.

Introduction

On 05 Nov 2024, the United States (US) held its Presidential Elections following a contentious campaign. With the eyes of the world upon it, the US elected Republican candidate Donald

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Trump and his running mate, James David Vance, to the White House. Within the next few days, the Republican Party gained a majority in the Senate and the House of Representatives, completing a sweep of the elections. With a majority across the board and President-Elect Trump having promised a complete overhaul of the US government, there is an expected churn in the US, including, but not limited to, its foreign policy and its involvement in the multitude of ongoing wars worldwide.

Having spent the majority of his campaign arguing for a US that refrains from participating in wars, Trump garnered massive support from both the American populace and international stakeholders who wanted Washington to stop funding wars. The domestic population supported this stance for reasons related to internal development, while global actors aligned with it on myriad grounds, depending on their calibration on the international stage. This article is written to address the implications of Donald Trump winning the Presidential Election, focusing on major flashpoints, the various actors on the global stage, and their potential alignments in the wake of Trump potentially fulfilling the promises that led to his re-election to the Oval Office.

Written in the latter half of Nov 2024, following Trump's electoral victory, this article reflects the geopolitical realities at the time of writing in a rapidly evolving global climate.

The Russo-Ukrainian War

The Russian invasion of Ukraine, referred to as a 'Special Operation' by Moscow, has been ongoing for nearly three years, since the full-scale invasion in Feb 2022. The Russians have made gains in capturing Ukrainian territory, while Ukrainian forces have managed to slow the advances, going back and forth in certain regions. In Aug 2024, Kyiv stunned Moscow by launching a surprise offensive on the Ukraine bordering Kursk, advancing up to 30 kms into the Russian region, forcing President Vladimir Putin to evacuate nearly 2,00,000 from along the border and instituting a state of emergency in the regions of Kursk and Belgorod.¹ A fortnight later, Ukraine claimed to have control over nearly 1,200 sq kms of Russian land. Some of which has been retained by Moscow, however, Kyiv still has military presence within the region.² Russia, according to the BBC, lacking the

manpower to fight the Ukrainians on multiple fronts, countered by deploying an unconfirmed number of North Korean troops in the same region.³

The issues in eastern Ukraine remain as complex and unresolved as those in neighbouring western Russia. Fighting is ongoing on multiple fronts, although Russian forces currently hold the clear upper hand. As of this writing, Moscow maintains control over parts of the highly contested regions of Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, Donetsk, and Luhansk, in addition to Crimea, which was annexed in 2014 (Map 1).



Map 1

Source: Institute for the Study of War⁴

Such is the prevailing condition as Donald Trump assumes the role of President-Elect and waits for 20 Jan 2025 to be formally sworn in as the 47th President of the United States (POTUS). The anti-war Trump has promised to end the war in one day.⁵ Though it can be dismissed as a hyperbolic election promise but it is, regardless, antithetical to the US policy of funding the Ukrainian war effort, having given USD 175 bn as war aid to Kyiv.⁶ Although Trump has not detailed the 'How' of his peace plan for the war in Ukraine, Vice President-Elect Vance, in Sep 2024, had stated that Trump would tell Moscow, Kyiv and the Europeans that "You guys need to figure out what a peaceful settlement looks like".⁷ He further elaborated on a possible plan for peace to prevail, wherein, he stated that such a deal could be along the lines of Russia keeping the territory they have captured through the course of the war, along with a demilitarised zone drawn along the battlelines as of the date of the ceasefire. To assuage Kyiv's concerns about future Russian aggression, the Ukrainian side would be heavily fortified.⁸ Vance finished by stating that while Ukraine would retain its sovereignty, Moscow will get a 'Guarantee of neutrality' from Kyiv and that the latter would not join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) or any such allied institutions.⁹

The Trump 'One-day' guarantee to end the war may be far-fetched but it has the potential to be realised, albeit in a greater time-frame. The plan proposed by Vance is akin to the demands put forward by Putin. The Kremlin's demands for ending the war included that Ukrainian troops leave the entire regions of Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia, and that they be declared Russian by international agreement. "As soon as Kyiv says it is ready to make this decision, begins the actual pull-out of forces from those regions, and formally declares the abandonment of its plans to join NATO, we will instantly, that very second, order a ceasefire and begin negotiations", Putin said.¹⁰ He further put forward the demand for the removal of all financial sanctions imposed upon Russia.¹¹ Even this demand of Moscow aligns with Trump's vision of a peace deal who has categorically stated that he would remove all sanctions placed upon Russia, citing that sanctions hurt the US Dollar's dominance. He said, "You're losing Iran; you're losing Russia. China is out there trying to get their currency to be the dominant one. You're going to lose the dominance of the dollar".¹²

Trump's stance may be motivated by the BRICS nations' desire to establish their own currency. Such an eventuality, if it comes to pass, devalues the dollar, the outcome of which has been likened by Trump, "The equivalent of losing a war. That would make us (the US) a third world country".¹³ Furthermore, the President-Elect has been long critical of the NATO for not carrying its weight. The cornerstone of NATO alliance is the Article 5, which essentially commits each member state to treat an attack on an alliance ally as an attack against every NATO country.¹⁴ In 2006, NATO Defence Ministers agreed to commit a minimum of 2 per cent of their Gross Domestic Product (GDP) to defence spending to continue to ensure the alliance's military readiness.¹⁵ Herein, lies the source of Trump's indignation with the NATO, the refusal of individual member states to commit at least 2 per cent of their GDP towards defence expenditure, forcing the US to make-up the deficit.¹⁶ The President-Elect has gone to the length of even threatening to leave the alliance if this trend continues.¹⁷ At the same time, Putin has had his own gripes with the NATO, whose never-ending eastward expansion has been a thorn in the side of Moscow. The Kremlin's decision of invading Ukraine arose as a result of Ukraine possibly joining NATO, which would have resulted in western troops being stationed on Russia's doorstep.

All things considered, Trump's win augurs well for those seeking peace in the region. Putin's demands for peace align with the Trump's concessions and plans. The outgoing presidency has long insisted that those demands amount to capitulation, not negotiation. Victoria J Nuland, a former senior State Department official, who helped shape the Biden administration's Ukraine policy, said Vance's plan was very similar to what Putin had repeatedly offered as peace terms.¹⁸ The stance of the Biden Presidency came to a boil in the early stages of the interregnum when President Biden allowed the use of US-made Army Tactical Missile System (ATACMS) to be targeted into Russia.¹⁹ Putin would respond by threatening to breach the nuclear threshold²⁰, which as of this writing has not occurred.

Israel-Hamas War

The war for Jerusalem—a city considered divine by the Jews, Christians, and Muslims—has been waged for, perhaps, longer than any war in human history. Hundreds of thousands of soldiers,

mercenaries, and civilians have perished in the region, some for the Cross, some for the Crescent, and others for the Star, the latest iteration of which came unexpectedly for everyone but the Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiyya (Hamas) on 07 Oct 2023. A shell-shocked Israel launched an unprecedented war against the aggressing Palestinian elected party. More than a year later, before the US Presidential Election, thousands have perished. Even though the Hamas appears to be on the backfoot, the end to the war seems as distant as the dream of spring in an Arctic winter.

Throughout the course of his campaign, Trump had unequivocally condemned the 07 Oct attack on Israel which resulted in more than 1,100 casualties, persistently backed Israel in eradicating the Hamas. The President-Elect's stance has been to support the Jewish state's right to pursue its goals in the region, further stating that "We're going to make Israel great again".²¹ He has also said that he would be the "Best friend Jewish Americans have ever had in the White House".²² Trump's approach contradicts Biden's who had delayed the delivery of weapons to Israel. The President-Elect's support for Israel through his speeches when canvassing coupled with the decision to support Israel's claim over the Golan Heights²³ and trebled with him, in his first Presidency (2016-20), having shifted the US Embassy in Israel to the city of Jerusalem²⁴, shows a clear alignment with the Jewish state. It would be prudent to assume that the US will adopt a more pro-Israel stance.

The 'Axis of Resistance' (AoR) is an Iran-backed, loosely coordinated coalition comprising groups such as the Islamic Resistance in Iraq, the Popular Mobilisation Forces, the Syrian government, Lebanese Hezbollah, the Yemeni Houthi movement, and other smaller factions. Over years, and in some cases decades, this coalition has been built through substantial Iranian financial, military, and ideological support. It describes itself as a unified front opposing the hegemonic influence of Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the US in the Middle East. Although not a formal member, Hamas liaises with the AoR periodically, particularly during times of heightened tensions. Following the events of 07 Oct, Israel has found itself in direct or indirect conflict with nearly all major constituents of the AoR.

Hamas, considering Trump's pro-Israel stance, seems to have recognised which way the wind is blowing. The US designated terrorist body²⁵ has, through a senior official, said that the group is "Ready for ceasefire". The statement also 'Urged' Trump to 'Pressure' the Jewish state for the same. Bassem Naim, a political bureau member of the Hamas, said that "Hamas is ready to reach a ceasefire in the Gaza Strip if a ceasefire proposal is presented and on the condition that it is respected".²⁶ The statement in question comes a week after Qatar, which houses much of the self-styled resistance group's leadership including its political bureau, officially stepped down from its role as mediator between the two belligerents stating that it would only "Resume its efforts.... when the parties show their willingness and seriousness".²⁷

In the middle of the hostilities between the warring states lies the Hezbollah, the Lebanese Shia Islamist political party and paramilitary group, which despite ostensibly lacking a direct stake in the conflict willingly stepped in of its own accord by launching guided rockets and artillery onto three posts in the Shebaa Farms, a region on the Lebanese-Syrian border which is currently under Israeli occupation, 'In solidarity' with the Palestinian people.²⁸ As of this writing, a US and France-brokered ceasefire agreement has been signed by both Israel and Lebanon. According to whose terms, Israeli troops are required to withdraw from southern Lebanon, and Hezbollah pull back north of the Litani River, ending its presence in the south. For achieving the stated objectives, 60 days have been given to both sides and the Lebanese army, which has largely remained a bystander in the current war, will deploy to the south to monitor the ceasefire.²⁹

The Houthis have gone to the extent of attacking trade ships in the Red Sea (a critical passage for 30 per cent of the world's container traffic), thereby, causing the Red Sea Crisis. Launching missiles and armed drones at Israel, demanding an end to the invasion of the Gaza Strip.³⁰ Trump had, in his first presidency, designated the Yemeni militant group as a 'Terrorist' body and has been critical of its actions in West Asia. The Houthis, according to rumours on social media, on 06 Nov 2024 appeared to be ordering an immediate ceasefire as Trump's victory loomed large. However, on the very next day, perhaps to dispel the scuttlebutt, Abdul-Malik al-Houthi, the leader of Houthi movement, while talking about Trump, stated that, "He did not end any wars, he did not end the war in Yemen, in Syria, in Iran, he did not do anything —

he's incapable...".³¹ Essentially stating that Trump is bound to fail, Malik further added, "Our operations at sea continue... and other operations in the depth of the Israeli-occupied Palestine".³²

The Israel-Hamas conflict has already proven to be a seemingly never-ending war. Hamas in Article 1 of its charter titled, 'Hamas Covenant 1988' claims that, "Israel will exist and will continue to exist until Islam will obliterate it, just as it obliterated others before it".³³ On the other hand, Israel asserts that the conflict is a matter of its survival. This assertion of the Jewish state is perhaps best described by Golda Meir, former Prime Minister of Israel, who once stated that, "We Jews have a secret weapon in our struggle with the Arabs; we have no place to go" and that "The Egyptians could run to Egypt, the Syrians into Syria. The only place we (the Jews) could run was into the sea, and before we did that, we might as well fight". Herein lies the rub. One side is acting on a religious diktat and for the other, it is a matter of its survival, though for them (Israel), it is also the ancestral home of their religion. Therefore, it can be assumed with some certainty that neither is truly backing out of the hostilities for good. And then lies the bigger issue of the AoR. The current iteration of the Israel's troubles in the region might have started with the Hamas but they are certainly not limited to the Palestinian organisation. Even if Israel were to somehow finish-off the Hamas, their problems would not end. The constituents of the AoR are all Islamic states (of different denominations) who, much like the Hamas, have based their aim of annihilation of Israel on Islamic religious practice.³⁴

The pertinent question here is: When and under what circumstances can a short-lived armistice be achieved?

Possible Outcomes

As the date of the swearing-in draws ever closer, the situation in both conflicts is still developing. President Putin has responded harshly to the use of the American-made ATACMS being used to target Russian territory, having begun the process of using (according to a CNN report) nuclear-capable missiles to strike Western targets.³⁵ Two of the three anti-Israel factions mentioned above have called for a ceasefire. One of them, the Hezbollah, has even fully agreed to one. However, the détente was short-lived as Israel has already fired missiles into Lebanon citing overstepping of the terms of the ceasefire agreement by the Hezbollah.³⁶

For the Russo-Ukrainian War, the path ahead seems to be very clear. For the Russians, it is a game of time. Wait out the leftover period of the Biden Administration, which as of this writing is a little more than a month and 20 days, and get the peace deal signed which, as mentioned above, both the parties are willing to sign. However, nearly a month and a half in geopolitics and strategic affairs is a long time, especially in a situation that is developing as fast as the one in question. Therefore, the situation devolves into prognostication of eventualities.

There are four possible outcomes before the swearing in of Donald Trump as the 47th POTUS. The first, if President Biden, in the time he has left, decides to escalate further, his counterpart in Moscow will have no choice but to retaliate in kind. Russia is a nation that does not take kindly to weakness of those in power.³⁷ This will leave Putin with no option but to respond with at least equal force in the theatre of war. The other European nations have already begun taking the brunt of this latest escalation. The Russian forces have blown up a train in Ukraine that came from Romania with British Storm Shadow missiles and ATACMS.³⁸ In this scenario, the scope of escalation is limitless. Other European nations, threatened by the targeting of their infrastructure, may respond in kind. President Putin has threatened breaching the nuclear threshold if Russian territory is threatened and has begun the use of nuclear-capable weapons in combat.³⁹ However, the use of nuclear warheads seems to be mere scare tactic on the part of the Kremlin as the fallout of such an eventuality far outweighs the benefits to Russia. Because even Donald Trump, who has advocated for not being in conflict with Russia, would have to reverse his stance in such a case. Second, the Biden Administration makes no more attempts at escalating the situation and quietly passes the time it has left in power. In both the above cases, there is a common element of preparing for the coming negotiations. As one unnamed western official on condition of anonymity has claimed, "Everyone is assuming that there is a negotiation to come and both the Ukrainians and Russians want to be in the best place for it".⁴⁰ Though it must be, for the sake of objectivity, pointed out that escalations from the Russian side only have come in response to Washington allowing the use of ATACMS against targets within the Russian territory.

The third possible outcome is the most obvious of all, wherein, Trump is sworn in as president and follows on the promises made in the lead-up to the election as elucidated in this article. This eventuality works in favour of those wanting peace to prevail, though the Ukrainians are sure to bristle at the loss of territory. Kyiv, however, will not have any recourse without the backing of the US-led West. The fourth and final probability is that Trump gets sworn-in and refuses to follow up on the promises he has made in regard to the Russo-Ukrainian War. Highly unlikely though it may be, it needs to be entertained. In this case, the war would resume with renewed ferocity and escalation would be certainly guaranteed, though even in this case the nuclear threshold would not be breached.

While on the Middle-Eastern front, President-Elect Trump faces a tough task in dealing with the AoR. However, the complications are not merely limited to the West Asian alliance. There is also the issue of the US' domestic discourse. On the political front, he faces virtually no opposition as the Republicans have the majority in both the Senate and the House of Representatives. On the other hand, Trump faces the challenge of managing the perception of being pro-Israel and the purported genocide affected by the Jewish state on Palestinian people. The history of the American discourse in dealing with non-American and European issues often boils down to navel-gazing. Where any and all 'Resistance' movements irrespective of their drawbacks are praised to the high-heavens, while brushing under the carpet the more questionable aspects of the movements in question.⁴¹ Case in point, the support garnered for the Palestinian cause in the American zeitgeist. Wherein, the US universities erupted in large-scale protests against Israel, citing the deaths of women, children and the non-combatant men at the hands of the Israel Defense Forces missile strikes and bombs, while conveniently ignoring the lengths that the Hamas goes to maximise civilian casualties.⁴²

Trump, in his first tenure, had been aligned with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and had even approved an arms package to counter the Yemeni Houthis.⁴³ While KSA is upset at the devastation wrought by Israel's wars in Gaza and Lebanon, it is not shedding a tear for the weakening of Hamas and Hezbollah, according to people familiar with the leadership's thinking.⁴⁴ It,

however, has categorically stated that a new Abraham Accords cannot be reached without the Palestinians having a secure home in the region. A careful perusal of Trump's utterances on the war in West Asia points to a similar stance of being against militant groups, such as the Hamas and Hezbollah, and not the Palestinian people. Israel's Prime Minister has also claimed that the Hamas must be completely destroyed before Israel will agree to end its war in Gaza. These conditions, at least on the face of it and as of this writing, do not appear to be mutually exclusive. Therefore, at least in theory, a truce may be in the offing. However, the Hamas, Hezbollah, and Houthis have proven to be endlessly belligerent and, considering their history, will try to create a barrier to a possible détente.

Conclusion

As the global community stands at a pivotal moment, the election of Donald Trump as the next US President introduces a complex interplay of challenges and opportunities in the Russia-Ukraine and Israel-Hamas conflicts. In the Russo-Ukrainian War, Trump's proposed approach aligns closely with Russia's demands, potentially paving the way for peace. However, the next few weeks will be crucial in determining whether the outgoing Biden administration opts for further escalation or refrains from complicating the impending transition.

In the Middle East, Trump's pro-Israel stance signals a shift in the US' policy that could embolden Israel while potentially alienating factions within the AoR. The possibility of a ceasefire remains tenuous, as entrenched ideological divisions and historical grievances continue to drive hostilities. While Trump's leadership may offer new avenues for diplomacy, the path to lasting peace will require careful navigation of domestic and international pressures.

At this point, for both the conflicts mentioned in this article, Donald Trump's Presidency does seem to have a positive effect for those hoping for peace to prevail. What matters is in what situation the President-Elect will assume the Presidency. Will the outgoing Biden Presidency cause substantial changes to take place in the time it has left or will it reduce its meddling in the two conflicts. Only time will tell.

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