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Behind the Trump Transition Headlines, the Yeoman's Work of Building Foreign Policy

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Well before his inauguration, the president-elect can take steps to calm foreign allies and build domestic support by conveying a sense of his strategy and priorities overseas, both in private and, to some degree, publicly.

Speculation will continue over the coming days and weeks about high-profile positions in a Trump administration. But that's only a small slice of the presidential transition and the task ahead of Donald Trump's [team](#).

As the election results became clearer Tuesday night, U.S. allies and adversaries began [looking for signals of U.S. intentions and preferences abroad](#). President Barack Obama's term is dwindling rapidly, and Congress enjoys far less power than the White House on international affairs. Some allies hope that U.S. retrenchment under President Obama will be reversed by his successor. And some of Mr. Trump's statements during the campaign suggested he may depart significantly from U.S. policy on trade and alliances. But [how he might do so](#) is unclear; Mr. Trump, like most presidential candidates, left vague his foreign policy plans.

All of which raises the already high stakes for a president-elect whose lack of record in elected politics makes him largely an unknown quantity. Right away, he can calm allies by conveying a sense of his strategy and priorities overseas, both in private and, to some degree, publicly. Doing so can tamp down instability associated with uncertainty over forthcoming policy; it's also likely to help avert steps by allies to hedge their bets, as well as to begin building support for Mr. Trump's plans (which would help him to hit the ground running after the inauguration).

Conveying a sense of strategy would also help guide and focus the U.S. bureaucracy. The national security apparatus is far too vast to micromanage successfully: The United States is engaged in innumerable activities abroad, most of which do not require significant presidential attention and are tended to by career service experts. Yet for the sum of those efforts to be coherent -- and, better yet, for the foreign policy whole to be greater than the sum of its parts -- the White House must provide simple, clear strategic guidance. It's most helpful when it is affirmative guidance; warnings such as President Obama's [don't-do-stupid-stuff directive](#) serve to deepen the bureaucracy's already strong aversion to risk and tendency toward inaction.

[Headlines about transition planning](#) tend to involve stories about [Cabinet personnel](#) and other high-level appointments. Yet a vast amount of the transition lies in filling the thousands of lower-level appointee positions that do the yeoman's work of policy making. The sheer number of slots means that many will need to be filled by individuals who did not serve in Mr. Trump's presidential campaign, many of them from the career service.

Some might see this as a problem. It's actually a strength of the system: allowing different perspectives to be brought to bear on problems facing our country, from a staff unified by a devotion to country and civic duty. This structure, however, makes it all the more vital to have a clear national security strategy issued from the top. It is one thing for officials to have different perspectives and opinions; it's quite another for them to pursue different strategies within the same administration.

The administration's initial foreign policy moves -- often dubbed the "100-Day Plan" -- will convey its top priorities and help provide direction amid a sea of issues demanding attention. Yet for all the virtue in proactively setting priorities, much of foreign policy is inevitably reactive: dealing with problems as they erupt in the world. This enhances the need to supplement proactive planning with efforts to determine what known events will command senior-level attention -- foreign elections, summits, legislative waiver decisions (such as on Iran sanctions) -- as well as preparing for unanticipated events. Assigning a strategic planning team to start mapping out potential issues or problems that would implicate U.S. interests, such as a war or terrorist attack, would help ensure that appropriate plans are in place to respond to or, better yet, prevent such exigencies.

The other key element: giving thought to process. Without a well-designed process for reaching and implementing decisions, even the most brilliantly conceived policies and the most capable officials are likely to fail. Ideally, policy making is decentralized, with agencies both accountable and empowered; well-coordinated, with a National Security Council that seeks to knit together rather than supplant federal agencies; and efficient, with clear lines of authority that do not overlap and clearly mapped areas of responsibility within and between the agencies.

President-elect Trump will not be inaugurated until January. But his foreign policy begins now.

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