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Hope and Despair: **Reactions to the Trump Election**

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The election of Donald J. Trump to the US presidency for a second term has brought about a number of starkly contrasting reactions about its implications and possible consequences. While in the GCC states, the resonance has been mostly positive, suggesting a readiness to engage in a series of deals with the renowned businessman and dealmaker-turned President, there are deep levels of concern in Europe concerning potential tariffs on imports to the US and the future US position on the Ukraine crisis. This brief, a collaboration by the research staff of the Gulf Research Center (GRC), takes a quick look at some of those reactions and the repercussions that can be expected.

The Gulf and US-GCC Relations:

As world leaders react to Trump's victory in the US presidential election, the GCC states led the way in congratulating the president-elect and voicing optimism about tackling the challenges at hand. Saudi Arabia's King Salman sent a cable of congratulations, praising US-Saudi relations and emphasizing "the shared desire to further strengthen these bonds in all areas." HRH Prince Mohammed bin Salman, Crown Prince and Prime Minister, in a phone call, expressed Saudi Arabia's "eagerness to strengthen the longstanding strategic and historic ties" between the two countries.

While the Gulf countries have consistently emphasized their commitment to working constructively with any US administration, regardless of political affiliation or the specific presidential election outcomes during the elections, US-GCC relations are expected to strengthen under Trump's second presidency. In his first term, Trump placed the Middle East high on his agenda: Trump chose Saudi Arabia for his first foreign visit as president in 2017, underlining the importance of US-Saudi relations, and his administration brokered the 2020 Abraham Accords with Arab countries. This trend will most likely continue in his second term.

The wars in Gaza and now Lebanon will most likely be at the top of Trump's Middle East agenda. Throughout his campaign, the president-elect consistently promised to bring the wars to an end, and while there is a sense of hope, the region has not forgotten that during his first term, Trump took several steps in Israel's favor, such as recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel in 2017. It therefore cannot be discounted that Trump's re-election would add a layer of uncertainty due to his strong alignment with Israeli policies. His support for Israel's stance in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict risks marginalizing Palestinian interests and complicating a two-state solution. It also remains difficult to see how the divide between Trump's objectives to expand the Abraham Accords can be bridged with Saudi Arabia's clear insistence that any normalization with Israel can only come about with a clear path to Palestinian statehood. What this suggests is a full, yet quite volatile agenda.

Africa:

The election of Donald Trump could bring a renewed focus on transactional and pragmatic approaches when dealing with African countries, although policies toward Africa rarely shift significantly between US political parties. Under Trump's first administration, there was a strong focus on countering China's influence, and this approach may continue given Beijing's substantial economic and political presence in African nations. A new Trump administration might aim to curb China's interests in Africa by strengthening trade and investment through initiatives like the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), while likely placing less emphasis on social issues that were prioritized under the Biden administration. For many African leaders, this shift towards a transactional focus on trade and development over social benchmarks could be welcomed.

Moreover, Trump's positive relations with Gulf leaders and their private sectors could influence his approach to Africa. The current US administration has collaborated with Saudi Arabia to secure critical minerals in Africa, and a Trump administration might continue or even deepen these partnerships, given the strong ties he holds with the GCC states. Counterterrorism may also take center stage in Trump's foreign policy towards Africa, as he has previously prioritized the fight against terrorism. With extremism spreading through the Sahel, Trump could seek to work with GCC allies, like Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which have already been involved in combating extremism across the continent.

Europe:

For Europe, the Trump victory will force the EU to re-evaluate its policies and strategies, especially regarding strategic priorities and transatlantic relationships, namely defence spending, energy independence, and diplomatic ties with China and Russia. Given the changing geopolitical environment, Europe will have no choice but to become more resilient in the face of international uncertainty.

Before election day, a Trump victory was associated with European politicians who voiced serious fears about the future of US assistance for Ukraine despite its prolonged confrontation with Russia. As European countries struggle with their own defence capabilities and economic issues, the uncertainty of US support exacerbates the EU's military support and strategic cooperation. Additionally, Trump's plan to implement tariffs could sever long-standing economic links between the United States and Europe, raising concerns about a resurgence of trade disputes. Given these difficulties, EU leaders are expected to focus, more than ever, on bolstering defensive capabilities and internal unity while managing a potentially turbulent relationship with the United States under Trump's direction. At the same time, this could prove beneficial to the EU-GCC Strategic Partnership that just held its first ever summit meeting in October 2024 with a clear commitment to expanding ties.

China:


The election of Donald Trump as President for a second term would likely usher in a period of intensified competition and heightened unpredictability in US-China relations. During his prior term, Trump launched a trade war that placed tariffs on hundreds of billions of dollars' worth of Chinese goods, fueling economic tensions between the world's two largest economies. His administration also targeted Chinese tech giant Huawei, branding it a national security threat and pressuring US allies to limit their engagement with the company. For China, a second Trump administration could mean a return of these tactics, but potentially on a broader and more aggressive scale.

A renewed Trump presidency could signal an era of increased uncertainty, as his "America First" approach could lead to stricter protectionist policies. Trump has pledged to pursue a more aggressive version of this agenda, with tariffs potentially rising to levels not seen since the Great Depression. Such moves would not only impact Chinese businesses but also risk disruptions to the broader global economy, with ripple effects across trade networks and economies deeply linked with China. For China and its trade partners, a second Trump term could likely mean navigating a much more turbulent economic landscape.

Chinese officials are likely to adopt a wait-and-see approach in the coming months. Since the new US president's inauguration will take place in late January, it will take several months for the policies of the Republican president to take shape. Chinese President Xi Jinping may also want time to evaluate how effective recent stimulus measures have been that were announced at the closing of the end of the week-long session of the National People's Congress Standing Committee on November 8.

Japan:

The anticipated dynamics between the United States and Japan under a Trump administration, particularly with Shigeru Ishiba as Japan's Prime Minister, could be characterized by a mix of strategic challenges and opportunities for deeper bilateral cooperation. Former President Trump's return to office for a second term could likely signal a return to some of the policies and rhetoric seen during his first term, which emphasized a transactional approach to alliances and prioritized US economic interests. This could mean renewed pressure on Japan to increase its financial contributions to US military bases and a push for more equitable trade terms.



Prime Minister Ishiba, known for his defence expertise and commitment to strengthening Japan's military capabilities, would likely navigate these demands with a strategic eye on maintaining regional security. Ishiba's administration may aim to bolster Japan's self-reliant defence posture while ensuring that the US-Japan alliance remains robust. Given China's increasing assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific region, both countries would share mutual interests in enhancing security cooperation, although differences may arise regarding burden-sharing and specific military strategies.

Economically, a Trump-Ishiba era could bring renewed negotiations over trade agreements. Still, Trump's protectionist leanings might lead to friction, especially if he pushes for changes to existing trade frameworks in favor of American exports. However, Ishiba's pragmatic approach and deep understanding of Japan's economic needs may foster diplomatic efforts to strike a balance that satisfies both nations. Additionally, sectors such as technology, supply chain resilience, and energy security could become focal points for collaboration, helping to solidify a partnership that adapts to evolving global challenges.

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