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THE CURRENT: What will Trump's final foreign policies mean for the Biden administration?

Wednesday, December 9, 2020

Host: Adrianna Pita, Office of Communications, Brookings

Guest: Thomas Wright, Senior Fellow and Director, Center on the United States and Europe, Brookings

(MUSIC)

PITA: When news came out last week that President Trump had given his foreign policy team free rein to take aggressive steps against Iran, as long as they didn't "start World War III," it was one more in a series of moves the Trump administration has taken in its final weeks and months to cement its policy priorities into a bulwark against the priorities of President-elect Joe Biden and his team.

Here for a look at the final days of Trump's foreign policy and what it will mean for the incoming Biden administration is Thomas Wright, senior fellow and director of the Center on the United States and Europe here at Brookings. Tom, thanks for talking to us today.

WRIGHT: Thank you, it's great to be here.

PITA: I think I'll start by asking you to start us off with a little bit of a historical perspective. Obviously, every outgoing administration that's being replaced by the opposing party would prefer that its worldview had prevailed, but how have they actually behaved when it comes to taking actions with the potential for long-term repercussions or for handing off ongoing situations?

WRIGHT: I think there's a few things that are pretty typical historically that are not happening now. Firstly, usually on the night of the election, the outgoing administration offers ascertainment to the incoming administration. So, the very next day the incoming administration shows up with landing teams at the different agencies, to go in and take over some office space and begin to talk to and interview not just political appointees but the civil servants and officials within those different departments and try to figure out how to implement their policies. The outgoing administration will usually have very comprehensive briefing documents to bring them up to speed as quickly as possible.

None of that obviously is happening now. President Trump is not acknowledging the result of the election. Ascertainment was offered recently. In some agencies, it seems to be working OK; in others, like the Department of Defense and the White House itself, it is not. Either the transition is struggling to get full access or there's lots of bureaucratic obstacles being put up in terms of meetings. So that whole category of normal activities that take place in a transition, I think that's fundamentally different in a detrimental way.

The second area is a little bit different, but it gets right to your question, which is the outgoing administration will usually hit pause on anything they want to do and defer those choices for the incoming team and try to set those up in a way that allows them to exercise their prerogative to make the choice, recognizing the outcome of the election. Occasionally there'll be certain things that the outgoing team want to do, but they'll usually be compatible to some extent to what the incoming team wants also: maybe

a trip in the final few months or some sort of unfinished business they want to wrap up. What we're seeing here is unprecedented, which is that the Trump administration is trying to do things that will make the incoming administration's life as difficult as possible or potentially less stable as we're seeing in the case of Iran, for instance, where there's more of a path to confrontation at the present time. I can't think of a similar case in the modern history of transitions where that path has been followed.

PITA: In a November 17 article, CNN cited one unnamed Trump official who stated that their goal is to set so many fires that it will be hard for the Biden administration to put them all out. In addition to making the resumption of negotiations with Iran as difficult as possible, the Trump administration has also taken steps like fast-tracking the sale of F-35s to the United Arab Emirates, even over concerns from some Senate Republicans, planning the withdrawal of some 2500 more troops from Afghanistan by mid-January, right before the Biden administration comes in, designating Houthi rebels in Yemen as terrorists, and some more. How would you characterize the final days of the Trump administration's foreign policy? Besides the general delay of ascertainment process and policy cooperation overall that you've mentioned, are there any specific moves that particularly concern you?

WRIGHT: I really hope that that comment, that quote that you mentioned does not reflect their thinking, because one would hope that they're taking actions just because they believe they're the right thing to do and that they may worry the Biden administration won't do certain things so they're trying to lock it in. Like I said, it's not very in keeping with precedent, it's not very deferential to the will of the people as expressed in the election, but at least you could say that it does reflect their best judgement on what is needed in U.S. foreign policy. If their position is that they're actually trying to create crises or difficulties, that would be particularly regrettable and dangerous.

My own view, for what it's worth, certainly with the National Security Council, I think that they're more likely to be in the camp of trying to lock in things that they think are the right thing to do, even though the Biden team may have a very different perspective. I would be surprised if they were deliberately trying to create crises, although obviously President Trump is more erratic and volatile; it's hard to know what he's thinking on the matter. But I think there's a different way of looking at it; you could see it through either prism.

In terms of things they're doing, it is interesting to me in Afghanistan, this could end up sort of backfiring on them substantively as well as politically. Afghanistan was going to be quite a difficult choice for the incoming administration. Biden had said he wanted to withdraw troops, similar to what President Trump has said. By forcing this through and by doing what he's done at the Pentagon in terms of personnel, Trump has taken on sort of all the political risk, all of the responsibility for this; to some degree he's made it politically easier for Biden. This may be one reason Biden has chosen Lloyd Austin as secretary of defense, but I think we'll see how it plays out in the incoming months of next year, but my main point is this is not necessarily going to play to the Trump administration's advantage in terms of legacy or effectiveness. It could backfire.

The other measures – I think the Iran one is what will be of most concern to the Biden team in that obviously, the further along the path to confrontation the U.S. and Iran are, the more difficult it may be to have any hope of resurrecting the JCPOA. So that probably makes that more difficult.

PITA: On the personnel front, this fall we've seen both the firing of Secretary of Defense Mark Esper as well as the firing of Chris Krebs, the director of Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security. While

successors in the chain of command were quickly named as acting secretaries and acting directors, do late-stage changes in leadership like this have detrimental effects on the policy handover process?

WRIGHT: They are unprecedented. Again, I can't really think of a case where anything like this has happened before. I think Esper, part of that was Trump's frustration with him for Esper standing up for the rule of law over the summer and opposing Trump invoking the Insurrection Act for protests in Washington over the murder of George Floyd. So, some of it is backward-looking in terms of the beef between those two. Some of it I think was probably on Afghanistan, there was also some discussion that it may have been Russia-related as well. I do think it has had a detrimental impact. Now that ascertainment has been granted, I think the transition would be much more smooth at the Pentagon if Esper was still in charge. So, I think that's a direct consequence of some of the people who've been brought in there. I think it also sends a message really that Trump wants to impose his will on this for as long as he can. Ultimately, their time is running out. There's only a limit to what they can do that can't be reversed. So, absent a major crisis, most of these measures could be reversed by a President Biden if he wanted to.

To me, one of the major takeaways of all of this is it does offer a glimpse into what a second Trump term would've looked like. If you look at all of those changes he's making in the transition period, he probably would've made those more permanently if he had won re-election. I think that would be very concerning, to see the hollowing-out of the Pentagon, imposing people over there in an acting capacity who are more political loyalists. The acting secretary of defense is not necessarily an uber-loyalist, but many of the other people around him are, so I think it is a reminder of that alternative administration that could've come into being had the election gone a different way.

PITA: Well the Biden administration will be coming in of course to a situation of a global pandemic, a deeply struggling economy, as well as the wide variety of foreign policy priorities. What do you see as what will be the most urgent matters for Biden and his team to be addressing?

WRIGHT: It's an extraordinarily difficult situation. I think by far the most difficult problem they will face is the pandemic. Some of the predictions are that by January, there could be between 3-4,000 people a day dying from COVID. That's the equivalent of one 9/11 every day. The vaccine will still be some ways off. One area that's worth mentioning from the transition is that there's not been much cooperation on the pandemic between the outgoing administration and the incoming administration. The incoming administration seem to think on the logistical side for distribution of the vaccine there are many questions that have not been answered yet. So they may take the reins really without a plan for effective and rapid distribution of the vaccine. So, that's one example of where really this breakdown will have a huge human cost. But I think that will be President Biden's first challenge, will be to really get control of the pandemic and then to have a vaccine distributed fairly equitably and rapidly, domestically and then of course internationally.

More broadly than that, one or two things worth mentioning: I think the domestic economic challenge will be key, and how does he realize his campaign promise of building back better. But then internationally, since we are talking about foreign policy, how his foreign economic policy can play into that. What can he do internationally to try to really show the American people that the global economy is benefitting them directly? Then, I think the China issue, the China challenge will be in parallel a major issue, in terms of the rivalry and how to ensure that there's a bipartisan and sustainable to competition that allows for some cooperation as well.

PITA: All right. Well, Tom, thanks very much for your words today and we'll see what happens.

WRIGHT: Thanks, Adrianna. I really enjoyed it.