

Loyalists and revolutionaries? Trump is making first foreign policy nominations

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Donald Trump not only secured the majority of electoral votes but also won the popular vote. This dispelled doubts about the presidential election results, enabling the early formation of his new administration. The Republicans managed to gain control of the Senate and maintain a narrow majority in the House of Representatives, which will facilitate the implementation of the new leader's agenda. However, the Democrats will still be able to block most legislation in the Senate (requiring only 41 votes to do so), and divisions between the various factions among Republicans in the House of Representatives may re-emerge.

Trump has already announced several candidates for key positions in his administration, allowing for initial speculation about the direction of his policies. The likelihood of initiating peace talks between Russia and Ukraine, potentially leading to a freezing of the conflict, has increased. Trump's characteristic individualism and unpredictability are expected to significantly shape his decisions as President of the United States.

Priority areas: immigration, foreign policy, and the armed forces

Since Trump won by a significant margin (securing 312 out of 538 electoral votes) and the media announced his victory almost immediately following the election, he was able to begin assembling his new administration without delay. The appointment process is progressing significantly faster than it did eight years ago, when the names of some key figures were revealed only three to four weeks post-election, and the entire process was markedly disorganised. Notably, the candidates are selected from a short list, including the future Vice President, J.D. Vance, and billionaire Elon Musk. The work of the president-elect's team may have also been streamlined owing to the involvement of Susie Wiles, the incoming White House Chief of Staff, who oversaw Trump's campaign this year.

The first nominations have been made in areas covering immigration, security, foreign policy, and the justice system, reflecting the priorities of the new administration. A key characteristic of the announced nominees is their loyalty to the president-elect. Trump intends his trusted team to reorganise the armed forces (Pete Hegseth as Secretary of Defence), the justice system (Pam Bondi as Attorney General), and intelligence services (John Ratcliffe as CIA Director and Tulsi Gabbard as Director of National Intelligence, DNI). This approach may arise from his enduring distrust of state institutions, a sentiment carried forward from his first term, and could also signal a comprehensive reorganisation of the federal administration.

The key roles in foreign policy have been assigned to Marco Rubio as Secretary of State and Michael Waltz as National Security Advisor. The announcement of a Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), to be led by Elon Musk – an advocate for reducing federal red tape and implementing budget cuts – alongside businessman and former Republican primary candidate Vivek Ramaswamy, suggests that significant changes are planned. It is uncertain whether Congress will approve the creation of the new department or if it will instead be established as an advisory body to the head of state. Most of these nominations will need to be approved by the Senate in 2025, after the inauguration of the new president, scheduled for 20 January.

A tough stance on China and pushing for peace in Ukraine

The announced nominations reinforce the key foreign policy direction that Trump championed during his campaign: prioritising competition with China, increasing pressure on Iran, bolstering support for Israel, and working towards a swift resolution of the war in Ukraine. The specific views of the nominees provide some insight into who might influence Trump as the nation's leader and in what ways. However, the future shape of US foreign and security policy will also be affected by the president-elect's distinctive autonomy and unpredictability. While advisors and associates have influenced his decisions in the past, he has often acted on his own, frequently disregarding their advice.

The new administration is expected to take a much more assertive stance on China. Both the future Secretary of State, Rubio, and the recently nominated National Security Advisor, Waltz, agree that the greatest threat to the United States today stems from the course charted by the Communist Party of China. Waltz believes that US forces, which are currently overstretched due to conflicts in Europe and the Middle East, should prioritise confronting Beijing. Meanwhile, Rubio has emphasised the economic and technological dimensions of the rivalry with China, suggesting that Beijing is observing with satisfaction the US involvement in the war in Ukraine.

There is a growing likelihood that the new administration will aim to freeze the conflict and initiate peace negotiations between Ukraine and Russia – a direction both Waltz and Rubio support. They both voted against the aid package for Ukraine this April (see '[The new US supplemental bill on Ukraine and the threat to confiscate Russian assets](#)'), while it was Vance who suggested freezing the conflict and creating a demilitarised zone along the current frontline during the campaign. Specific plans in this area are not yet known.

Should Vladimir Putin refuse to engage in peace talks, the US may increase pressure on Moscow. This could include tightening sanctions, boosting military support for Ukraine, and abandoning previous 'red lines', such as restrictions on the use of US weapons to strike deep within Russia – an approach advocated by Waltz. However, a scenario involving additional arms supplies to Kyiv will be contingent on the willingness of the Republican majority in Congress and Trump's ability to advocate for such an approach among radical Republicans. In this context, the nomination of Gabbard may raise some concerns as she criticised the imposition of sanctions on Russia shortly after it invaded Ukraine, and argued that Western states should acknowledge Moscow's security concerns about Ukraine's potential NATO membership. If her nomination is approved, Gabbard, as DNI Director, would sit on the National Security Council, and thus she will be able to directly influence the president's decisions.

The new US administration will exert much greater pressure on European allies to increase their defence spending. This demand is not only a cornerstone of Trump's rhetoric but is also endorsed by other Republican figures, including Waltz and Rubio. However, it does not necessarily translate to calls for reducing US military involvement in Europe, although such proposals have surfaced within the president-elect's circle. As a senator, Rubio co-authored legislation preventing the unilateral withdrawal of the US from NATO by the president without Congressional approval.

It can be expected that, irrespective of the nominations, the future US administration will adopt several new protectionist measures. Trump's key campaign promise was to impose tariffs on imported goods – 60% on those from China and 10–20% on others. These measures, however, may encounter resistance from Congress, particularly the Senate. It is highly likely that the new administration will renew heightened pressure on Iran, a stance endorsed by both the incoming National Security Advisor and Secretary of State. Another significant aspect of Middle Eastern policy is that the other nominees uniformly express a strong support for Israel. Alongside Rubio and Waltz, notable figures include Elise Stefanik, appointed as Ambassador to the United Nations; Mike Huckabee, set to assume the role of Ambassador to Israel; and Steve Witkoff, designated as the President's Special Envoy to the Middle East.

Congress vs. Trump's second administration

Congress will, of course, play a significant role in shaping US policy. While the Republicans have secured a majority in the Senate (likely 53 out of 100 seats) and maintained their lead in the House of Representatives (with vote counting ongoing in several districts), this does not ensure automatic approval of the president-elect's nominations or legislative agenda. A sign of some defiance among senators is the election of John Thune, rather than Rick Scott – Trump's preferred candidate – as the Republican majority leader. The Senate's autonomy may be evident, for instance, in attempts to block the most controversial nominations, such as Gabbard, since the presidential nominations for most top government positions, ambassadors, and judges must be approved by the Senate.

Trump has already begun exploring alternative solutions, suggesting he could make recess appointments to bypass Senate approval temporarily. However, since 2007, the Senate has effectively blocked recess appointments. Therefore, such a move would have to be consulted with the new majority leader.

The president-elect appears to have significantly stronger leverage in the House of Representatives, partly due to his close relationship with Speaker Mike Johnson. However, with the Republicans' holding only a majority in this chamber, tensions could arise between the presidential administration and the party's radical wing, which demonstrated a degree of independence from Trump during his previous term.

The new Congress is scheduled to be sworn in on 3 January 2025. Until then, the Senate will remain under the control of the Democratic Party. During this period, Democrats will aim to pass a stopgap bill to keep the government functioning, as well as to confirm judicial nominations put forward by Joe Biden. Another priority will be the passage of the National Defence Authorisation Act (NDAA), the annual defence spending bill, which is traditionally voted on in December.

Appendix. Nominees for the most powerful positions in the new US administration

Susie Wiles – nominated as White House Chief of Staff. A political consultant with decades of experience working with Republican Party politicians. She worked on Trump's 2016 campaign in Florida, and played a key role in helping Ron DeSantis secure victory in the Florida gubernatorial race in 2018, and oversaw Trump's presidential campaign in recent years. Wiles is widely regarded as one of the pivotal figures behind the Republican candidate's re-election success.

Marco Rubio – nominated as Secretary of State. Rubio has represented Florida as a senator since 2011 and has served as Vice Chair of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, as well as a member of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, since February 2021. Rubio, whose parents emigrated from Cuba, ran in the 2016 Republican presidential primaries but ultimately lost to Trump. Considered a potential vice-presidential candidate for 2024, he has long been an advocate of a tough stance on China and Iran. While he initially condemned Russia's actions against Ukraine both before and after the invasion, his position shifted after 2022, becoming more sceptical of continued aid to Kyiv in its current form and instead favouring a peaceful resolution to the conflict.

Michael Waltz – nominated as National Security Adviser. Waltz is a US Army veteran who served in Afghanistan and has represented Florida in the House of Representatives since 2019, serving in the Committees on Foreign Affairs, Armed Services, and Intelligence. He has been particularly outspoken in his criticism of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. While he supported Ukraine and voted for aid to Kyiv following the February 2022 invasion, he later revised his stance, arguing that assistance in its current form was not achieving the desired outcomes. He is known for his 'hawkish' views on competition with China.

Pete Hegseth – nominated as Secretary of Defence. Hegseth is a US Army veteran with combat experience in Iraq and Afghanistan. He has worked as a presenter on the conservative Fox News channel since 2014 and authored several military books. Hegseth criticises European NATO allies for inadequate defence spending, advocates a hardline stance on Iran, and supports robust US backing for Israel. He is also known for opposing so-called 'woke ideology' influence in the US Armed Forces.

John Ratcliffe – nominated as CIA Director. From May 2020 to January 2021, Ratcliffe served as Director of National Intelligence (DNI) during the final months of Trump's first term. Prior to that, he represented Texas in the House of Representatives from 2015 to 2020, where he served in the Committee on Intelligence. Ratcliffe is known for his 'hawkish' approach to relations with China.

Tulsi Gabbard – nominated as the Director of National Intelligence. Gabbard represented Hawaii in the House of Representatives from 2013 to 2021 as a member of the Democratic Party. She ran in the 2020 Democratic presidential primaries but later gravitated toward the Republican Party to officially join the party in October 2024. She served in the Hawaii National Guard and is currently a lieutenant colonel in the US Army Reserve. Gabbard has expressed scepticism about US aid to Ukraine and criticised sanctions imposed on Russia. She is also known for opposing certain US military interventions, including the Iraq war, and has been critical of US policy in Syria, notably meeting Bashar al-Assad in person.