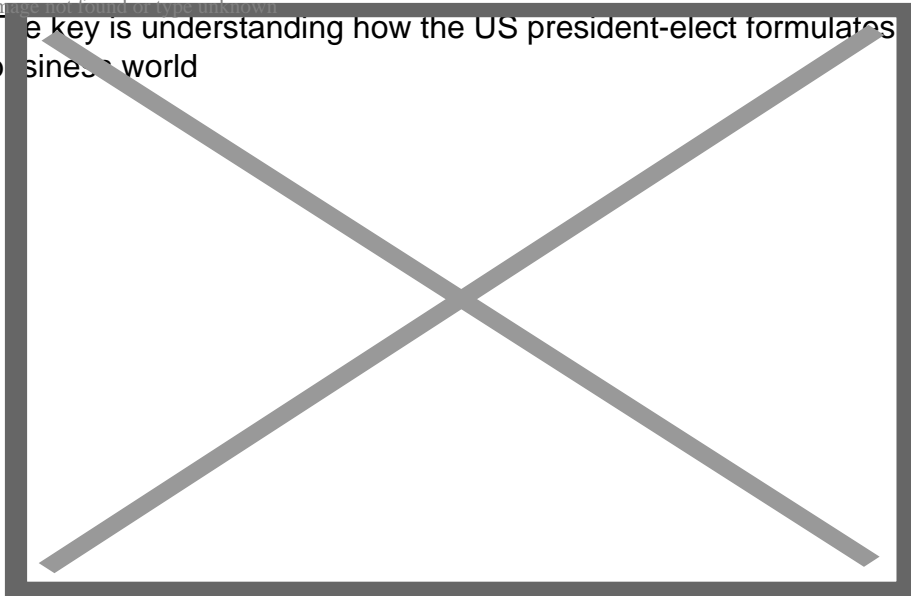

Understanding How Trump Formulates Policy

Description

by Fyodor Lukyanov

The key is understanding how the US president-elect formulates policy, and his background in the business world



Donald Trump formulates his

political course using memes. Strategies, programs and action plans are then drawn up by people around him. But the impetus comes from the main character's pronouncements.

That's why we hear the US president-elect promise to end the war in Ukraine in 24 hours. It sounds unrealistic, to say the least, but it reflects his desire. Which is obviously a conscious one. Which means it shouldn't be dismissed out of hand.

It's a pointless exercise to speculate on the basis of leaks and anonymous comments from people – supposedly – close to Trump about what he really has in mind. In all likelihood, he doesn't yet know himself what he will do. What matters is something else: how Trump's approach to Ukraine will differ from that of the current presidential administration, and whether he even understands rapprochement.

With regards to the first of these, the difference is stark. President Joe Biden and his team represent a cohort of politicians whose views were shaped by the end of the Cold War. America's ideological and moral righteousness – and its unquestioned power superiority – determined not even the possibility, but rather the necessity of world domination. The emergence of rival powers that could challenge certain elements of the liberal world order has been met with fierce resistance.

That's because this setup didn't allow for any deviation from its basic principles and refused to allow for compromise on fundamental issues. Russia's actions in Ukraine are seen as an encroachment on the

very essence of the liberal order. Hence the call for Moscow's "*strategic defeat*."

Trump stands for a change in positioning. Instead of global dominance, there will be a vigorous defense of specific American interests. Priority will be given to those that bring clear benefits (not in the long term, but now). Belief in the primacy of domestic over foreign policy, which has always characterized Trump's supporters and has now spread throughout the Republican Party, means that the choice of international issues is going to be selective. Preserving the moral and political hegemony of the US is not an end in itself, but a tool. In such a system of priorities, the Ukrainian project loses the destiny it has in the eyes of the adherents of the liberal order. It becomes a pawn in a larger game.

Another peculiarity of the president-elect is that even his detractors largely admit that he doesn't see war as an acceptable tool. Yes, he'll use hard bargaining, muscle-flexing and coercive pressure (as practiced in his usual business). But not destructive armed conflict, because that is irrational. Trump doesn't seem to have a twisted heart when he talks about the need to stop the bloodshed in Ukraine and Gaza.

Now let's look at his methods. Trump's previous term offers two examples of his approach to regional conflicts. One was the 'Abraham Accords', an agreement that facilitated formal relations between Israel and a number of Arab countries. The second was the meetings with Kim Jong-un, including a full-fledged summit in Hanoi.

The first was the result of shuttle diplomacy by Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner. The powerful financial interests of America, the Gulf monarchies and Israel led to a series of shady political deals. The current situation in the region is many times worse than it was then, but it cannot be said that the arrangements have collapsed. The framework is still in place. But such a foundation can hardly be considered a model. The system of relations in the Middle East is very special, and the scale of the Ukraine conflict is incomparably greater.

The second example is negative. Trump hastily tried to shift the systemic confrontation by resorting to a spectacle. The bet was on pleasing the ego of the interlocutor – the first North Korean leader to meet with a US president. It didn't work, because beyond that there was no idea how to solve the real complex problems.

However, we can't simply project the legacy of 2016-2020 onto the period ahead. Trump has gained some experience. His environment is different now, and his electoral mandate is what he could only have dreamed of back then. There is more room for maneuver than before, but not enough for the genuine concessions needed for a comprehensive agreement with Moscow.

It is in Russia's interest to remain calm, and to refuse to react to any provocations. Yes, objectively the situation is changing. But now everyone will be talking about the fact that a window of opportunity has opened for a short time, and we must not miss this chance. In crises like the Ukrainian one, there are no simple solutions or easy "*shortcuts*." Either this window is a gateway to new stable relations – and it cannot be forced open, but will need a careful approach. Or it's a portal to an even more brutal struggle, because it births yet another disappointment.