

# Other countries are still trying to figure out what Trump means to them

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By [Erin Cunningham](#), [Joshua Partlow](#), [Simon Denyer](#), [Michael Birnbaum](#) and [Carol Morello](#)

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Much of the world is in a quandary, still unsure what to expect from the administration of President Trump. The Chinese are unexpectedly hopeful. Europeans, less so. And Mexico remains wary, if less frightened than when Trump took power on Jan. 20.

“We can’t keep assuming there is now an established order,” says Sergio Aguayo, a Mexican political analyst. “There will likely be more turbulence to come.”

In capitals around the world, foreign leaders are trying to figure out exactly what the administration’s foreign policy positions are and how to best engage with a president who has embraced being unpredictable.

Here are reports on the perspective in four key regions around the globe as Trump mark’s his 100th day in office.

## **Trump vowed to stay out of Syria. Then he dropped a bombshell.**

Of the many things President Trump was expected to do in his first 100 days, launching an attack on Syria’s military certainly wasn’t one of them. Throughout his campaign, Trump praised Syrian President Bashar al-Assad for “killing ISIS,” a common acronym for the Islamic State, but also vowed to keep the United States out of the Syrian civil war.

So when Trump ordered missile strikes at a Syrian air base on April 7 in response to an alleged chemical weapons attack by the Syrian government just days earlier, he took many in the region, and the world, by surprise.

Some of Assad’s regional rivals, including leaders in Turkey and Saudi Arabia, welcomed the U.S. assault as long overdue.

Others, such as Iran, were unsurprisingly critical. And Egypt, a U.S. ally, urged all sides to show restraint.

Although the strike appears to have been an isolated incident — a swift answer to a single attack, divorced from broader strategy in Syria — it was also a reminder that Trump’s approach to the region remains unpredictable. The shifts have left some befuddled over how the president crafts Middle East policy.

The ongoing turmoil will challenge the already chaotic decision-making process of the Trump administration, said Ayham Kamel, Middle East and North Africa director at Eurasia Group, a political risk firm. And among the region’s leaders, “there is certainly concern over process,” he said.

Middle East governments “want to understand” how Trump moved so quickly from one position to the other on Syria. And even among those who welcome the tougher policies, “there are whispers regarding what the U.S. president might demand [from them] in the future,” Kamel said.

Trump, for instance, cozied up to Egyptian President Abdel Fatah al-Sissi, inviting him to the White House and keeping quiet about his government’s human rights abuses. But privately, he pressed Sissi to release an Egyptian American aid worker, Aya Hegazy, after she had spent nearly three years in jail.

In Turkey, the government initially welcomed the Trump presidency, and President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has repeatedly expressed faith that his nation’s relationship, which frayed under President Barack Obama, would improve. But Trump has shown little interest in ending the U.S. military’s cooperation with Kurdish militias in Syria, where both are battling the Islamic State. That policy has angered Turkey, which sees the Kurdish militants as a threat, and the tensions are once again boiling over. This week, Turkey carried out airstrikes on U.S.-allied Kurdish militias in Syria.

“There’s a feeling in Washington that Turkey is an important ally that needs to be accommodated,” Kamel said. But “I don’t think that this administration is willing or will be willing to change its alliance with Kurdish forces.”

— *Erin Cunningham,*  
*in Istanbul*

## **Mexico braced for a coming storm. Now it is exhaling a bit.**

Donald Trump’s presidential victory pushed Mexico’s panic button. The value of the peso tumbled. Analysts warned of recession, unrest, a populist anti-American tidal wave that would sweep the nation.

For the first weeks of Trump’s presidency, Mexico was in the crosshairs as much as any country in the world. Fearing that Trump would tear up NAFTA, deport millions, and start breaking ground on the border wall — all campaign promises — Mexicans swapped out top diplomats and began preparing for calamity.

The temperature has lowered since those frantic first weeks, when President Enrique Peña Nieto canceled a visit to Washington after Trump tweeted that Mexico should pay for the wall. Since then, the value of the peso has recovered, the stock market has risen, and cautious optimism is creeping back into the public debate.

The North American Free Trade Agreement remains the key issue for Mexico. The United States receives the bulk of Mexico's exports, and the Peña Nieto administration is a strong believer in free trade. A draft Trump administration proposal on NAFTA revisions that surfaced in March gave Mexico hope that the changes might be relatively modest. Then this week, Trump threatened to withdraw from the trade agreement before quickly reversing himself after speaking with Peña Nieto and the prime minister of Canada, Justin Trudeau, saying he will now instead push hard to renegotiate the deal.

In other ways, Trump has backed off, refraining from attacking Mexico on Twitter. Top Mexican officials have repeatedly met with their American counterparts.

Mexico has also tried to make new friends. The government has had talks with Argentina, Brazil and others to increase trade ties in an effort to become less reliant on the United States.

“The Mexican government has adapted to the Trump storm,” said Raul Benitez Manaut, a professor who specializes in security issues at Mexico's National Autonomous University. “Trump was very aggressive with Mexico in the beginning, but the level of violence has lowered now that NAFTA is in the hands of negotiators.”

A Trump administration that appeared like an out-of-control freight train a few months ago now seems to be moving at the speed of a hand-trolley.

The vast budgetary and logistical hurdles involved in building a border wall reassure Mexican officials that this project is still a long way from reality. Ramping up deportations has also been slowed down by the capacity of the immigration court system and the number of customs and Border Patrol officials.

“Mexico right now is much calmer, the elites are calmer,” said Sergio Aguayo, a political analyst and professor at the College of Mexico. Trump's team “is becoming aware of the enormous complexity involved with building a wall, imposing tariffs, deporting millions, and the one who in reality has changed is Trump.”

— *Joshua Partlow,*  
*in Mexico City*

## **China feels as if it has ‘declawed’ a tough-talking new president**

As far as China is concerned, President Trump is quite simply the best American leader since Richard Nixon.

That's the verdict of Shen Dingli, one of China's leading foreign policy experts.

The first 100 days of the Trump administration have been a testing time for China but ultimately a successful one. Threats to impose steep trade tariffs and declare China a currency manipulator have come and gone, a flirtation with Taiwan was worrying but short-lived. These days, the new chemistry, the new bromance, is with Chinese President Xi Jinping.

The weather vane has twisted from daggers drawn to hands grasped in friendship, according to a cartoon in China Daily. “Demonstrating his love again, China has never seen an American president so clingy,” the nationalist Global Times newspaper wrote, its tone simultaneously appreciative and mocking.

Trump says China is cooperating with American efforts to persuade North Korea to give up its nuclear program, but there are clearly limits to the pressure Beijing will bring to bear on Pyongyang.

Trump campaigned on the idea that China was a threat and that America’s allies in Asia were not paying their way. As president, he has done an about-face, adopting an approach not dissimilar to that of his predecessor — support for Japan and South Korea, and engagement with China — albeit with one crucial difference.

There is no more talk of norms, ideals and values, experts say, words that China hates and is very happy not to be hearing. Ideology moves to the back burner, pragmatism to the front, crowed the People’s Daily, the Communist Party newspaper.

That means a few things. One is that the United States won’t be making as much fuss about human rights — although it won’t have escaped Beijing’s notice that Secretary of State Rex Tillerson didn’t attend the launch of the State Department’s annual human rights report or that the embassy in Beijing didn’t sign a joint protest by 11 nations about the torture of lawyers.

It also means that American commitment to international law in the South China Sea and its support for allies that share its values appear shakier, more liable to be bargained away by a president who sees foreign policy in transactional terms, as a series of deals.

A billionaire with an ego, advised by a small coterie of confidants and family members: China deals with that kind of leader all over the world, and it knows how to do it.

“There is prevailing confidence among the Chinese that they have declawed Trump,” said Yanmei Xie, a China policy analyst at Gavekal Dragonomics.

“They feel certain they’ve concocted a winning formula, which includes currying symbolic favors to sate his ego, buttering up members of his family, and letting professionals in the U.S. foreign policy and business establishment school him on the paramount importance of stable U.S.-China relations.”

— *Simon Denyer,*  
*with Luna Lin, in Beijing*

## **Europe copes with an unusual chill from across the Atlantic**

E.U. officials held crisis meetings. They studied their legal options. And they decided they could reject President Trump’s pick to become U.S. ambassador to the European Union if that still-unnamed person wants to break up their struggling 28-nation bloc.

A hundred days into the Trump presidency, E.U. leaders in Brussels are struggling to accommodate a new U.S. leader who has few of the pro-European inclinations of his post-World War II predecessors. In this leafy capital beset by anxiety over Brexit — which Trump supported — and populist insurgents elsewhere in Europe, cocktail chatter quickly turns to Trump’s latest proclamation-by-tweet. Betting on whether Trump makes it to the end of his first term is a popular parlor game.

People are calmer than they were in January, when European Council President Donald Tusk lumped Trump with radical Islam, the Kremlin and China as one of the main threats facing Europe.

Trump seems “to put into question the last 70 years of American foreign policy,” Tusk wrote then.

Since then, officials have welcomed visits from Vice President Pence, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and Defense Secretary Jim Mattis. But many here are still struggling to square those officials’ mostly soothing messages with Trump’s more belligerent ones. Pence and Mattis were both offering reassurance at the Munich Security Conference in February when Trump called the news media the “enemy of the people,” a phrase with Stalinist resonance that undid much of their efforts.

Leaders shook their heads when Trump recently called Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to congratulate him on a referendum victory that critics say turns him into a dictator. (European leaders, by contrast, condemned Erdogan’s crackdown against his critics ahead of the vote.)

Europeans hope to get a direct read when Trump makes his first foreign trip to Brussels at the end of May to meet with the leaders of other NATO nations. That summit has been compressed into a single dinner, plus a ribbon-cutting at the glassy new NATO headquarters, to appeal to Trump’s short attention span and love for real estate.

— *Michael Birnbaum,*  
*in Brussels*

## **Put ‘on notice’ by White House, Iran treads with greater caution**

Since reaching a nuclear deal with six world powers in 2015, Iran is believed to have conducted more than a dozen ballistic missile tests. Only one came after President Trump took office, and none after his then-national security adviser Michael Flynn put Iran “on notice.”

Early this month, Iran released on bail a dual-national U.S. citizen convicted of aiding the enemy, namely the United States.

And Iran’s foreign minister reacted to a tongue-lashing from Secretary of State Rex Tillerson with a relatively mild admonition that the United States must meet its commitments under the nuclear deal.

None of this means Tehran has reined in behavior that Washington considers provocative and threatening, including support for the Syrian government and Houthi rebels in Yemen.

But it suggests Iran is taking a cautious approach to the new president, who campaigned vowing to scrap the nuclear deal.

While the White House weighs its policy options, it has acknowledged that Iran is keeping its promises under the nuclear deal in which Iran pledged never to build nuclear weapons. But Trump and Tillerson have expressed alarm at Iran's growing influence in the region and support for terrorism in backing Hamas and Hezbollah.

It's clear Tehran understands that the Obama era of wary cooperation on one issue, its nuclear program, is at a crossroads. For now, it is waiting and watching.

"Tehran's assessment of the Trump administration is that it doesn't have a solid strategy," said Seyed Hossein Mousavian, who was a member of Iran's negotiating team that agreed in 2003 to suspend uranium enrichment and is now a scholar at Princeton. "So Iran will be patient to see what the strategy will be."

Beyond Tehran's uncertainty about U.S. policy, Tehran may also be perplexed by Trump himself.

"Like everyone else, they have no idea who this guy is," said Mark Dubowitz, head of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies and a critic of the nuclear deal. "Could he be capable of ignoring them for four years, or walking away from the deal, or sinking an Iranian attack boat in the Gulf? Because of their uncertainty, they're a little more cautious in their behavior."

The lull may not last. On May 19, Iran holds presidential elections that will reflect to some extent whether Iranians think they have benefited from the nuclear deal's sanctions relief. And Congress is considering legislation to impose more non-nuclear sanctions on Iran, which Tehran has said it would consider a violation of the agreement.

— *Carol Morello, in Washington*

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