



US ELECTION REGIONAL IMPLICATIONS AFRICA: STILL SECOND FIDDLE

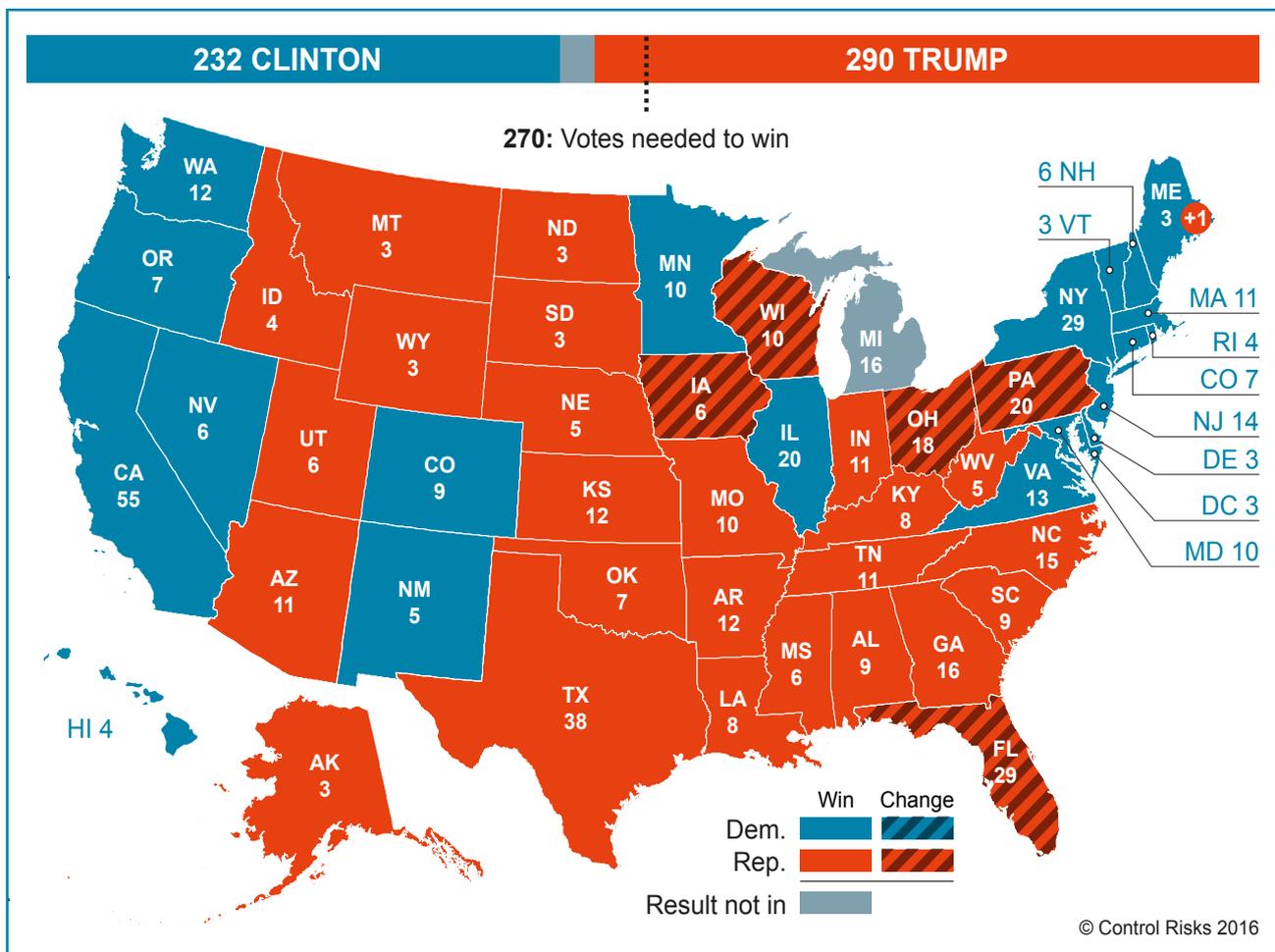
US ELECTION REGIONAL IMPLICATIONS

Republican candidate Donald Trump was elected as the next US president on 9 November, defeating the Democrats' Hillary Clinton. Due in part to Trump's strong showing, Republicans also retained a slim majority in the Senate (upper house) and a strong majority in the House of Representatives (lower house).

Narrow margins separated the two candidates in many states, as well as in the nationwide vote (separated by around 600,000 votes – 0.4% – out of more than 120m cast), underscoring the polarisation of the electorate. Both candidates, as well as outgoing President Barack Obama, issued pleas for national unity and a smooth political transition in the wake of a lengthy and often divisive campaign.

Unlike Clinton, Trump did not comprehensively outline his domestic and foreign policies. As a result, there is considerable uncertainty about which policies he will pursue in office, and how aggressively he will do so. In this report, we explore how the incoming administration is likely to approach and influence regional politics.

US Presidential elections results



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AFRICA:

STILL SECOND FIDDLE

Africa did not feature significantly during the presidential campaign, and the president-elect has made scarce reference to the region. As a result, there is little concrete indication of his administration's prospective policy toward the region.

However, the campaign's nationalist and isolationist themes suggest that Africa will become even more isolated from US policymaking. This could mark a departure from the last 15-odd years of bipartisan support for engagement centred around promotion of democratic values, respect for rule of law and human rights, security (especially counter-terrorism) co-operation, and development assistance (of which the US is currently the single largest provider).

We expect the most significant impacts for African countries will come through three aspects of the new administration's policy: curbing free trade, cutting aid and pursuing alliances that fit US strategic security interests.

SILVER LINING TO US TRADE POLICY?

A more confrontational approach to international trade could have a silver lining for sub-Saharan Africa. Should a major trade dispute with China, Mexico or other manufacturing exporters materialise early in the administration, US and foreign investors might look to low-cost labour markets with preferential trade access through the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), especially in East Africa.

AGOA was recently extended until 2025 and has historically had bipartisan support in Congress. That said – like other trade agreements with Asia and Latin America – its durability is in question given Trump's pledge to re-negotiate existing deals. Certainly, the idea of 'tilting the playing field' in favour of Africa is likely to appear alien to an overarching 'America First' trade policy.

US FOREIGN AID BUDGET LIKELY TO GET SMALLER, MORE CONTESTED

Trump will also look to achieve savings from the foreign aid budget for domestic priorities, including tax cuts and infrastructure spending. Currently, nearly one-third of all US official development assistance (ODA) – USD 8bn in 2015 – flows to sub-Saharan Africa, much for public health programmes such as the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR). Even though many fiscal conservatives are hostile to foreign aid in general, a good chunk of this funding enjoys strong bipartisan support in the US, including among the evangelical Christian constituency.

This sets the stage for a significant battle over levels of funding (probably destined to decrease) and allocation of funding (between social, political and security priorities, as well as between countries). As a public commentator and presidential candidate, Trump has consistently articulated a position that sees overseas aid as not in the best interests of the US. The little public comment he has made on Africa has carried the same message: all aid to Africa is 'stolen' through corruption.

This suggests that, within a potentially smaller foreign aid budget, funding will be mainly directed to health programmes with strong domestic political constituencies, and security priorities (chiefly counter-terrorism and countering-violent extremism). Democracy promotion, civil society support and the array of US government agencies overseeing foreign aid are likely set for a haircut. Even Power Africa – an electrification initiative launched by Obama – is likely to take a back seat to more hard-nosed priorities.

While this may be music to the ears of backsliding autocrats, it also injects a significant source of uncertainty into funding streams and bilateral co-operation, and is likely to push many African countries to seek closer relations with China, India, and other sources of development assistance.

SECURITY CO-OPERATION

We expect the greatest continuity in US-Africa relations to be in the area of security co-operation, specifically counter-terrorism. The US military's Africa Command (Africom) – actually headquartered in Germany, but overseeing everything from the hunt for Joseph Kony to drone surveillance of Boko Haram – is likely to emerge as a more important pillar of the new administration's engagement with the continent. After eschewing US security assistance for many years, some governments may seek to strengthen relations to tap US funding and take advantage of inattention to domestic political repression.

Trump's hawkish position towards the Islamic State (IS) and other jihadist groups will ensure a continued high degree of US security support and regional operations. At the same time, however, anti-Muslim rhetoric has alienated many Muslim Africans: this could complicate security partnerships, while also contributing to underlying radicalisation in the context of heavy-handed African security crackdowns. Given the dominance of local issues in militancy across Sub-Saharan Africa, if and how this plays out is likely to vary significantly by country.

GREAT GAME OVER?

Overall, the incoming administration is poised to shift US engagement with sub-Saharan Africa away from soft power initiatives towards a more security-led agenda. This will advance the trend across the region to look to alternate models of political and economic organisation, notably the blend of authoritarian politics and industrial policy exemplified by China. Indeed, the strong performance of Ethiopia and Rwanda in recent years already provides a regional model – albeit still reliant on foreign assistance – that many countries are seeking to emulate. Moreover, sub-Saharan Africa may soon have access to new, large pools of development capital from China and India as they look to strengthen South-South relations and secure strategic economic and military interests in the region.

Greater divergence in opinions among policymakers at the international and regional levels, as well as significant variance in attitudes among African leaders, on what is the ‘right’ approach for maintaining peace and driving prosperity, will now combine with even less coherence in the international community. This is likely to mean greater room for opportunists – presidents, ministers or other powerbrokers – to manipulate external partners for political and economic gain. We expect this to benefit leaders more interested in self-preservation than public policy, potentially aggravating political instability.

Meanwhile, the region will remain buffeted by external factors beyond its control and influence, including the overall performance of the global economy (expected to take a hit in the event of a major US-China trade dispute) and climate change (where Trump has pledged to withdraw US commitments, tantamount to dismantling the recent UN climate treaty).

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