



# SPEAKING TRUTH TO POWER —Global

## Preface

Throwing light on the key issues surrounding the forthcoming US election is what keeps these particular think-tanks busy. Meet the people whose remit is to separate fact from fiction.

EDITOR

Megan Gibson

Elections can be confounding and perhaps none more so than those in the US. The current presidential race, in particular, has left people around the world scratching their heads. From the dizzying primaries to the shocking rise – and even more shocking antics – of Republican nominee Donald Trump, the election has been a whirlwind of inchoate visions of the country and its future. And for all the media appearances and speeches, making sense of the key issues has been a challenge for even the savviest political wonks.

Yet for the academics and researchers at think-tanks around the world, parsing the election and its outcome is essential to their work as policy advisors. There are big questions to consider and while there may be few concrete answers before 8 November, we visit the institutes in the US and abroad that are carefully watching and weighing up the race.

The scholars at Brussels' Bruegel are assessing how a post-Brexit Europe will relate to a post-Obama America. The academics at the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre in Canberra are charting how the election will affect the security of the Asia-Pacific region. Meanwhile, for US-based Rand and New America, the next president could affect almost every aspect of their work. Read on to see what the thinkers are thinking. — (M)



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## How will the US election impact security in Asia?

**Name:** Strategic and Defence Studies Centre

**Location:** Australian National University, Canberra

**Head of department:** Brendan Taylor

**Founded:** 1966

**Staff:** 21

With the US's relationship with Asia potentially hanging in the balance, the head of Canberra's Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, associate professor Brendan Taylor, is watching the presidential race – and its more incendiary candidate – closely.

"The big question is if there is a difference between Trump the candidate and Trump the president," says Taylor. He and a colleague, associate professor Peter Dean, are concerned that after suggesting allies are dispensable in a campaign speech in July, Donald Trump is capable of withdrawing US forces from the Asia-Pacific region if he were to win the election, a move that could trigger regional insecurity. "If he does decide to pull troops out of South Korea and Japan, a potential consequence of that is a spreading of nuclear proliferation," says Dean.

Even if he does lose, Trump's candidacy is likely to shape US politics beyond the election. Dean contrasts the

- 01 The Strategic and Defence Studies Centre is housed in the Hedley Bull Building
- 02 Senior fellow Dr Peter Dean



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Republican nominee's rhetoric with the approach of former vice-president Al Gore after losing in controversial circumstances to George W Bush in 2000. "It wasn't about galvanising a movement to oppose the legitimacy of Bush as president," he says. "Whereas Trump is giving every indication that if he loses, he will push that. He's undermining the institutions and the foundations of democracy in America."

In Australia the Centre for Strategic and Defence Studies is one of those institutions actively seeking to influence policy and promote debate on defence, security and the island continent's place in the region and the world. Now in its 50th year, the centre was founded to fill a need. Asked in the mid-1960s to write a paper on the state of the nation's defence,

Australian National University professor Tom Millar found that there was no easily accessible research repository on which to draw. The centre was born and continues to be proud of its association with one of Australia’s most prestigious research universities.

Taylor believes that affiliation sets it apart slightly from stand-alone think-tanks. “We probably don’t put out as much as they do and can’t respond as nimbly to everyday events,” he says. “But then when we do put work out, it tends to be much deeper academic research. It’s almost like a bit of a hybrid: trying to walk that path between a university and an organisation that’s exclusively a think-tank.”

The institution’s primary focus, says Taylor, “is trying to do that rigorous academic research and then present it in a way that’s going to make it accessible to the public and to government as well”.

The centre has a handful of government-funded staff positions and is contracted to deliver graduate programmes at the Australian Defence Force Staff College. Taylor says the think-tank’s affiliations ensure accountability, though the institute maintains a fiercely independent stance. “I think it’s one of the things that Defence values,” Taylor says. “That we come in and give an unconstrained and an unfettered view.” — KAM

Biggest issues for the new president:

**Brendan Taylor on Clinton:** “I think we will see Clinton take a more hawkish approach than any of her predecessors. In the past China has backed down in the face of a strong US leader who sends out hawkish messages. The question is, is today’s China going to respond in the same way?”

**Taylor on Trump:** “It’s that US-China relationship. Trump is no Nixon. Nixon was a thoughtful, experienced geo-politician whereas a lot of Trump’s statements are appealing to a domestic constituency but reflect his inexperience. How much can we rely on those checks and balances in the US to curb and control Trump?”



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Who’s keeping an eye on public policy?

**Name:** Rand  
**Location:** Los Angeles  
**President and CEO:** Michael D Rich  
**Founded:** 1948  
**Staff:** 1,875

Take a lap around the Rand Corporation’s elliptical-shaped office building by the beach in Santa Monica and you’ll have walked nearly half a kilometre. The non-profit, non-partisan research organisation opened in 1948 and, while it now has offices in Washington and around the world, its west-coast location still sets it apart. “I lived in DC for 12 years and it’s a hard place to be during election season,” says Heather Williams, a defence-policy analyst who previously worked at the National Intelligence Council. “It’s hard to think big thoughts. Being here in LA is very helpful for that.” Though Rand (a contraction of “research and development”) started by advising the US air force and has a reputation for expertise in national security and defence, the think-tank now splits its focus between national security/international affairs and social issues such as health, education

and environment (both inside and outside the US). Indeed, Rand’s simulation model Compare, built in 2006 to analyse state and national health policy changes, is credited with helping to shape the Affordable Care Act, President Obama’s signature law.

Rand’s 1,875 staff members collaborate with local and federal governments worldwide on thousands of projects, from early intervention to counter violent extremism in Los Angeles to the first labour market study in Iraqi Kurdistan. They work closely with decision-makers to solve problems and publish their research, allowing the public to scrutinise and benefit. Rand even offers an on-site graduate school in public policy, where 100 students from 20 countries get real-world experience assisting on a broad range of projects. “If you’re interested in public policy there’s never a dull day at Rand,” says Andrew Hoehn (pictured), senior vice-president for research.

So how does a non-partisan research outfit, rooted in evidence-based research, handle an all-consuming presidential election focused more on personality than facts? “We don’t block it out,” says Krishna Kumar, director of Rand’s labour and population unit. “We are

interested in how people make political decisions.” Since 2006, Rand’s American Life panel has surveyed the same 6,000 adults on their political beliefs, often picking up changes in the electorate before other pollsters. For example, it found nearly a year ago that people who believe they have no say in the political process gravitate towards Donald Trump.

Regardless of who wins the election, Rand wants to advise on turning campaign promises into policy. It’s wrapping up a six-volume series on global strategy that lays out the choices for the next administration, whether on alliance relationships, national security or the global economy. The think-tank sees itself as a resource for policy-makers – but not as a validator. “We’ll respect the choice the public makes,” says Hoehn. “But we also have an obligation to bring the best available evidence to support those choices.” — DD

Biggest issues for the new president:

**Heather Williams on Clinton:** “One opportunity they are going to be presented with is trying new approaches. In Syria, for example, we aren’t seeing a lot of progress. There could be an opportunity to break with a previous policy and bring forth a new initiative.”

**Andrew Hoehn on Trump:** “More uncertainty. Just as Clinton would have to come to an agreement with Congress on domestic priorities, Trump would have to do the same thing. He’s called for changes in immigration policy, tax breaks and infrastructure investments. These are all areas where the president has enormous influence but isn’t the single voice.”

PHOTOGRAPHERS: JARED SOARES, ZICO O’NEIL

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What’s next for America’s relationship with Europe?

**Name:** Bruegel  
**Location:** Brussels  
**Director:** Guntram Wolff  
**Founded:** 2005  
**Staff:** 30 scholars and 15 non-research staff

With crises on so many fronts, Europe’s leaders may be forgiven for being a little distracted as US campaign season gets underway. But Guntram Wolff, director of Bruegel, an influential think-tank in Brussels, sees many challenges ahead for US-EU relations, and parallels in nationalist sentiment on both sides of the Atlantic.

“Brexit was the moment when people woke up and thought, ‘If this can happen in the UK – a mature democracy where a campaign based on lies actually wins – then who can guarantee that we won’t have a similar outcome in the US?’” says Wolff.

The US elections come at a time of deep soul-searching for the EU as it loses one of its most influential members, the refugee crisis exposes deep ideological

splits and the stability of the eurozone remains in doubt. The blow of a Donald Trump presidency would be keenly felt, with co-operation on security, trade and foreign policy all in jeopardy.

“Donald Trump would disengage from the world and certainly from Europe and there is quite a lot of concern not only in Brussels but in many capitals around Europe,” says Wolff.

Hillary Clinton, however, is a known quantity in Brussels from her time both as First Lady and US Secretary of State. She is seen as “a safe pair of hands; people see that she is very fact-based, very detail-oriented”, says Wolff.

It is these same qualities that have propelled Bruegel to the top of contact books in Brussels in the decade since its founding. Throughout the economic crisis, policy makers, journalists and other observers would turn to Bruegel’s experts to cut through some of the more hyperbolic claims and give an even-handed analysis of the threats to the union.

Named after the Flemish Renaissance painter Pieter Bruegel to reflect both the

creativity and the pan-European nature of the economic think-tank, Bruegel has a wide range of stakeholders from governments, the corporate world and institutions. No single member contributes more than 5 per cent of its yearly budget to ensure independence.

Twice a year Wolff briefs the 28 EU finance ministers. “That gives you a certain weight in the policy debate,” he says. “People know that a large part of the policy-making system reads what we write.”

With a CV that includes time at the European Commission, Deutsche Bundesbank and the International Monetary Fund, Wolff understands the many political and economic factors influencing governments but even he has been surprised by the tone of the US campaign. “It has revealed that even one of the most stable and oldest democracies is susceptible to an extremely dangerous campaign that could lead to a constitutional crisis,” he says. “There is a realisation that democracy is not something that one can just take for granted.” — CMG

Biggest issue for the new president:

**Guntram Wolff on Clinton:** “A Clinton administration will want to focus on opportunities for lower-income people and what she has announced – a larger investment plan – makes sense.”

**Wolff on Trump:** “The big question with his economic policy is will he really be the defender of the disenchanted white middle class? I think there is reasonable ground to be doubtful.”



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## Can the next president unify a polarised America?

**Name:** New America**Location:** Washington DC**President and CEO:** Anne-Marie Slaughter**Founded:** 1999**Staff:** 150

Head up to the ninth-floor reception of New America and you could be forgiven for thinking you'd walked into the offices of a technology start-up. Gaze towards the ceiling at the Washington-based think-tank and you'll see plenty of exposed pipework, while bright splashes of colour can be seen around the stairs and open-plan kitchens. To cap it off, several employees are perching on orthopaedic ball chairs.

Selling itself as “Renewing American politics, prosperity and purpose in the digital age”, New America is part of a new breed of “boutique” think-tanks that has emerged in the US capital. “We are the un-Brookings,” says Anne-Marie Slaughter, New America’s president and CEO since 2013, in reference to Washington’s most venerable institution. “We are now in an era when a third to half of how we are going to solve problems is through technology.”

Peter Bergen, vice-president and head of the international-security programme,

- 01 Political reform programme director Mark Schmitt
- 02 President and CEO Anne-Marie Slaughter
- 03 Staff meeting
- 04 Educational reform programme director Kevin Carey



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thinks New America stands out for another reason. “We’re not a government-in-waiting,” he says. Indeed, with the exception of Slaughter – who spent two years at the State Department as director of policy-planning under Hillary Clinton – the office doesn’t comprise “in and outers”, the industry term for think-tank employees who have been in government and are awaiting a change of administration in order to return. Instead, many of New America’s staff are journalists, regularly contributing to publications on the theme of the upcoming elections.

Bergen’s expertise has been regularly called upon to dissect the candidacies of Trump and Clinton and how they might deal with national security issues such as Isis or why Americans are becoming radicalised. When it comes to predicting how Trump might act as president, Bergen says, “He’s like the uncle you have at Thanksgiving dinner who thinks he has all the answers to the world’s problems.”

While New America’s aim is to have a broad reach through journalism, it also functions as a traditional think-tank by advising government and policy-makers, as well as analysing candidates’ policies, such as their stance on education. This year its programme on political reform seems particularly apt, given candidates’ talk of a broken system and big money. Much of programme director Mark Schmitt’s work involves trying to build consensus in a polarised political environment. “Are there ideas that could connect conservatives and liberals, Democrats and Republicans, to build a coalition?” he asks. His team has been looking into how small donors could have more clout



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in political campaigns and how Congress could be strengthened against exploitation by lobbyists.

Not that think-tanks are free from accusations that they may be a little too cosy to corporate interests at times, something Slaughter insists isn’t the case at New America. “We are mostly journalists and fiercely independent,” she says. “Our brand would die if it looked like we were paid to play.” — EJS

### Biggest issues for the new president:

**Peter Bergen on Clinton:** “If she is commander-in-chief she will be to the right of Obama on a number of issues. There would be a lot of continuity but she is comfortable with the use of American power.”

**Anne-Marie Slaughter on Trump:** “I think there could be a constitutional crisis. Based on what he says he wants to do he will give that order – such as torturing terrorists’ families – and the military will say it won’t do it.”



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