

NZ International Relations in the Age of Trump.

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Today modern technologies of instant communication connect our world in real time in ways that would be inconceivable to our forbears. National borders and extensive coastlines no longer insulate countries, nor provide the protections that they once did. Modern interdependence collapses time and geography. It reduces opportunities for reflection and considered response at moments of crisis. Deepening interdependence between countries and between the problems they confront, is a fact then of modern existence. No single country or group of countries, no matter how powerful, can alone cope with the big challenges of modern existence - climate change, pollution, resource depletion and copious migration involving multitude displacement.

Challenges

Yet one such product, the globalisation of the world's economy, offers great opportunity to those countries which equip themselves to seize it. The countries of East Asia, led first by Japan and then by China, demonstrate this through successful economic and social progress that is shifting the centre of gravity in the world economy, and changing the international pecking order. The focus for NZ international relations - its political, trade and economic interests - is being reshaped by this process and by the advantages of its (relative) proximity to this new centre of gravity.

Yet accelerating globalisation creates genuine anxieties amongst people in many places, NZ included. The ease around the world with which borders can be penetrated by those with malicious intent, as well by health pandemics, threats to biodiversity, and other afflictions, stimulate popular anxiety that governments

cannot ignore. Moreover, persistent economic and social inequality seemingly compounded through deregulated trade and freewheeling investment add to levels of popular misgiving. The original TPP debates here inside NZ were a symptom of broader concern elsewhere.

From all of this there emerges a vital need for codes of predictable behaviour between governments - that is for international rules - which sustain trust alongside respected institutions which are mandated to devise international rules and monitor compliance. And yet at this precise moment in time, events in the US and in Europe are moving in ways where predictability, reliability and trust are under a real spotlight. NZ's comfort zone in international relations is being spooked.

Problems

In 2016 the process of democratic choice in both the United States and in Europe produced Donald Trump and BREXIT. Gallons of ink have been spilt in many places trying to explain the reasons and to forecast the consequences, of both events. It is clear in both cases that simmering popular discontent was orchestrated and then exploited by political leaders and opportunists who place self-interests way ahead of willing hearted global or regional collaboration.

The BREXITeers for one convinced themselves that Britain's EU membership infringed sovereignty and thwarted national potential as well as interests. President Trump is convinced other countries have taken unrequited advantage of American prosperity. It is imperative to restore what he conceives as fairness through unilateral US retaliation to correct unfavorable trade balances with individual economies. Such action is actually illegitimate in terms of international rules that the US itself originally helped negotiate.

America's Legacy

And the world indeed owes the US a real debt for its energy and resourcefulness which in the 20th century laid the foundations for a rules based liberal international order from which others, like NZ, derive substantial benefit. American policy makers

believed then that US global leadership was best mediated through institutions committed to universal peace and prosperity, rather than by standalone assertion of supremacy and the right to do as it pleased. Under successive Presidents that idealism began to fade and the idea of America as an “exceptional nation” with the right to do what it alone judges appropriate in the world, steadily gained influence.

The list of American self-exemptions from international rules which are the product of principled negotiation, is long. Successive administrations over the years, withheld US support for a whole raft of agreements like the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), the International Criminal Court (ICC), the Nuclear Test Ban treaty as well as several arms control agreements including that banning land mines. In other cases, the US entered reservations on treaties that it did sign - like the Convention against Torture - in order to preserve loopholes for potential circumvention. The US has just now withdrawn from the UN Human Rights Council. Indeed, it has declined endorsement over many years, of several of the main UN human rights conventions including that on the Rights of the Child which specifically forbids forcible separation of children from their families, which is precisely the cause of present deep anguish at the Mexican border. The US actions there are described by the UN Human Rights Commissioner as “unconscionable”.

Although the process of US self-exemption did not originate with Donald Trump, there is little doubt that the unvarnished militancy of his “America First” philosophy and its battle cry of “Making America Great Again” is tarnishing US moral authority. Trade protectionism, threat of sanctions against allies and rivals alike, rejection of previously agreed agreements not just on trade, all in conjunction with the further magnifying of unmatched US military power including in space and cyber space, are hallmarks of the Trump administration’s transactional version of global leadership. Capricious Presidential tweeting on the internet affronts others. Foreign policy made up in this way by Presidential whim feeds profound uncertainty - even amongst the President’s own advisers.

Many Americans themselves are dismayed by the mortifying style and substance of President Trump. Some observers look resolutely for a silver lining. President Trump will after all not be around forever. One day there surely will be a return 'to the way things used to be'. After all, in the past America has displayed notable powers of recovery and reinvention - for example in the wake of disastrous defeat in the Vietnam War, and from the Watergate scandal that brought down President Nixon. Present dilemmas, in other words, are merely bumps along the road of established progress. But this is a little too credulous if one grasps the reality of disruptive influences inside America which President Trump is inciting. They suggest a fundamental change in the sense of American liberal internationalism. Other countries cannot moreover merely stand still awaiting an eventual American change of heart.

Those countries which have traditionally shared values with the US, like NZ, are confounded both by American disavowal of international rules and by accumulating alienation inside the US - racism, militarisation of law and order, deluded gun laws, demonisation of Islam and ideological paralysis within government; plus a version of democracy that is captured by financial contributions of wealthy special interest groups, while the gap between the very rich and the rest grows ever wider.

President Trump and his advisers depict the world as "extraordinarily dangerous". The idea of a global community of nations striving through international institutions for mutual benefit is explicitly denounced. Forceful US leadership is indispensable. There are here undertones of earlier Republican doctrines of President George W Bush. He dismissed multilateralism as the refuge of the weak, elevated preventive warfare as an operating principal for security (witness the disastrous 2003 Iraq war) and claimed that international security in the face of new threats depends upon whether one is for or against the US.

Looked at from one angle therefore "Making America Great Again" and the "America First" battle cry, represent just stark progression of those traditional

notions according to which the US is endowed by providence as an exceptional nation not necessarily bound by jurisdiction or by rules applying to the world more generally. President Trump however undeniably compounds the impropriety through a readiness to disparage allies and neighbours as rivals, and penalise them with financial and economic sanctions as well as unilaterally imposed trade tariffs. Such excess supersedes by an appreciable degree anything his predecessors contrived.

US-Europe

Even the NATO alliance the bulwark of transatlantic cooperation, is imperiled by President Trump's criticisms and actions. Meanwhile the pressures of mass migration from Africa and the Middle East menace the very foundations of the EU - just as a deeply conflicted Britain readies to quit. President Trump has reversed American foreign policy in ways that anger or distress European allies -over the Palestine peace process and the recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital, over the Iran nuclear deal and over diplomatic support and lavish arms sales to support Sunni Islam over Shia Islam that fuels critically inhumane conflict in Yemen.

It remains to be seen whether some European allies may now question whether to sustain commitments to the Middle East because of changed US policy that substantially shifts goal posts in that region. The imminent 2018 NZ Strategic Policy Review also will presumably shed light upon whether NZ too sustains its troop training commitment in Iraq; and, more broadly just how NZ foreign policy and strategic policy are proposed now to intersect in these uncertain times. Uncritical support for a coalition leader who explicitly denies the rule of international law and the role of international institutions, would be an error.

North Korea (DPRK) and Denuclearisation

Attention is gripped by the US-DPRK Singapore Summit. It was a most significant international event. What it will produce by way of an actual enduring contribution to peace and security regionally and globally, remains uncertain. Experts are still

scrutinising details of the fine print behind the Trump-Kim agreement for clues. Much water has still to pass under the bridge but everything depends vitally upon sustaining mutual respect and trust on both sides.

But at least a high level process has, for the first time, now begun and President Trump can justifiably claim an accolade. Nonetheless the process bears rather the imprint still of 'a deal' by a self-styled master deal maker. Exactly how is progress to be measured and by whom? By the Americans themselves alone? South Korean (ROK) President Moon deserves much credit for initiative and energy. Amidst the recent loose talk about who might merit Nobel Peace awards, he surely ranks favourable consideration especially for active support of a long overdue Peace Treaty to replace the 50-year-old armistice that halted the original Korean Peninsular war, to which of course NZ contributed forces.

Given NZ's own non-nuclear policy in law, the denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula cannot be viewed as a one shot project. There are larger lessons and wider implications. Prohibition of the spread nuclear weapons as laid down in the 1970 UN Nuclear Proliferation Treaty (NPT), applies **both** to signatory countries that do not possess such weaponry but may be tempted to acquire them; **and** to those who do possess the weapons but are required by the treaty to commence nuclear disarmament. It is a reciprocal bargain therefore between 'haves' and 'have nots'. But the Five traditional nuclear weapon states (the US, UK, Russia, France, China) resolutely ignore their side of the bargain even as they coerce and threaten others to comply.

That represents a glaring double standard. Unyielding protection of a grim monopoly virtually guarantees enduring instability. The spread of knowledge and technology and the particular prospect that human existence will be increasingly conditioned by artificial robotic intelligence (AI) reinforces the crucial need for a change of direction, because old nuclear deterrence theories of the last century will clearly not serve peace and stability in the 21st century. Restraint, control, decommissioning and eventual elimination of arsenals with that process led by the

traditional nuclear weapon owners, must provide the compass to fix the only rational pathway to avoid the crack of doom. The DPRK is in this sense a bellwether for the present century. Effective constraint upon DPRK must constrain as well those nuclear powers with interests in the Korean Peninsula - China, Russia, the US - otherwise denuclearisation there essentially remains a fiction.

NZ Response

So where does all this actually leave things for NZ international relations? On its own NZ has no power and miniscule influence to change trends in international affairs. In the past the NZ approach to international affairs was motivated by a fear of marginalisation, of being forgotten or “left out”. In a world of accelerating globalisation, marginalisation becomes an act of self- choice, not of inevitable fate. In international affairs the reality is that NZ, for the most part, travels beneath the radar screens of powerful nations. This bestows some consolation for being insignificant in the grand schemes of things. It is no great disadvantage even at times of great power rivalry although it crucially requires constant cultivation of NZ understanding, discernment and agility; as well as acceptance of international responsibility to play a part, in accordance with its means, in sustaining peaceable world order.

The lesson from the quarter century estrangement from the US over NZ's non-nuclear policy that ended in 2010, illustrates how under successive governments, NZ was able to readjust effectively beneath great power radar; and enhance new political, economic and commercial opportunity regionally in East Asia and globally sustain an international reputation with successful leadership candidatures for WTO, the Commonwealth, the World Court, and on the UN Security Council (UNSC). The fears of those inside NZ that the country had somehow ‘lost its way’, proved misplaced. The US relationship is happily restored but not in its previous form. The NZ non-nuclear policy endures. It continues to shape an important part of the country's international identity.

NZ has recently announced further increase in its overseas diplomatic reach with the opening of some new embassies. It is committed to recalibrating foreign policy in the Pacific Island region (PIR) where greater outside interest is proving inevitable, and dangers multiply from climate change and marine plastic pollution. But there is too the need to continuously deepen established bilateral and multilateral relationships notably in Asia, where consternation over President's Trump's policies is in plain view.

At a time when as well, worldwide cords of multilateralism are fraying under pressures from the original architect, the US, a mesh of additional and reinvigorated connections is needed by NZ to take the strain. Modern NZ experience, especially in Asia, teaches moreover that preferential trade agreements (even as we inaccurately call them 'free trade agreements') are built upon the foundations of solid political relationships, and that these take time and effort to nourish and then sustain. There remain important gaps in NZ's diplomatic reach which need to be filled particularly in both Africa and in Central Asia. In the latter case new economic opportunity will surely flow in important regional capitals along the route of the impressive Chinese One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative.

Because rules governing international trade are in particular danger, trade arrangements with likeminded others who share NZ's conviction about safeguarding an open equitable trading system, are at a premium. Even though actual negotiation will be demanding, a FTA with the EU ranks highly because it wisely, spreads NZ trade dependency and, equally important, because the EU along with China remains remain committed to upholding a rules based trading system.

There is a wider dimension. President Trump's explicit animosity across the board towards international agreements/institutions -UN, WTO, NATO, TPP, NAFTA, the Paris Climate Change agreement, the Iran nuclear deal etc. - heralds overall serious threat to the foundations of the international order. The need to reform many of the established institutions from the UN downwards, has long been

acknowledged on many sides although actual progress over many years is disappointing. Smaller countries like NZ have been amongst the vanguard of the reformers. What however to do now in the Trump era?

In parallel with efforts to extend its diplomatic reach, NZ has little choice but to strive in company with likeminded others, to demonstrate improved commitment to international institutions which underpin the global system; and are in dire need of substantial improvements. With Donald Trump in charge in Washington this supremely difficult task has just got harder. NZ prides itself on a readiness to “speak truth to power” in the case of China over human rights or policies in the South China Sea (SCS). It must now display similar readiness in the case of the US and the real dangers current policies pose to global convention and rule. In doing this NZ must draw upon attributes that it possesses.

NZ threatens no other country. It is internationally minded. It is evenhanded. It seeks a widening range of international partnerships, but apart from Australia it has no formal military alliances. Through the Waitangi Treaty NZ places reconciliation at the centre of its own democracy. Honouring the Treaty provides an enduring domestic challenge. In a globalising world this represents a permanent rite of passage to nationhood as NZ adjusts those special bicultural foundations to an inevitable multi-cultural future. In all of this NZ differs somewhat from other English speaking democracies - including Australia which coincidentally in its bid to remain America’s ‘best ally’ in Asia Pacific, exhibits absolute support of President Trump’s administration (“we are joined at the hip”)

NZ needs to fashion innate qualities in order to reflect its convictions about rules based behaviour in international affairs. There has been in the past a NZ predisposition inside the UN and other institutions, to prefer a ‘fast follower’ role, coat-tailing behind others, on important issues inside the multilateral system. Given the parsimonious resources traditionally devoted by successive NZ governments to external relations, such a stance sometimes made certain sense. NZ simply declined roles and extra burdens, although it played some part with some distinction on some issues like carriage of the human rights of handicapped people;

and it pursued successful candidatures for the UN Security Council (UNSC) and in other bodies.

But the general point is that the opportunities and responsibilities for accepting to play a more dedicated role as mediator, conciliator, or contributor to problem solving have been bypassed. Such opportunities are multifarious throughout the international system in the environmental, humanitarian, peace and security, human rights and trade/economics domains. Less reticence about selective volunteering for roles in management, mediation and problem solving activities is the logical part of any practical NZ demonstration of support for rules based international order - now under threat at the highest level.

All of this sounds a bit like motherhood and apple pie and a level of experience exists as the admirable effort at peacemaking in the Bougainville conflict proves - but that was over 20 years ago, and NZ has never sought to replicate the effort. There are models of dedicated internationalism to study like the examples of Norway or Finland as well as others. The qualifications and readiness for an enhanced role require special extra effort and added resources. Successive NZ governments over the years have equivocated about it all. Additional effort would extend deeper and wider connections between government, special interest, business, professional and academic worlds.

NZ's small defence force (NZDEF) is a real national asset. It has in the past displayed qualities of cooperation and interaction with others that has earned NZ a commendable reputation. But there is a marked decline in NZ support of UN peace keeping or making (PKO). Professional preference inside NZDEF remains firmly with involvement alongside US led 'coalitions of the willing' which are not quite the same thing. They confine NZ assistance to issues, regions and interests that are priorities for that most powerful country where support for comprehensive rules based international order is dramatically evaporating. Such preferences also hamper further development of operational ties with different partners, notably in Asia. Such key dilemmas must be addressed by weighing up the full sweep of NZ interests.

The goal must remain to better leverage the totality of what NZ is and seeks to be as a society, in order to bolster a role and contribution internationally that serves NZ interests - in a world and at a time where the country is, as the Prime Minister has observed, navigating a level of uncertainty not seen for several generations.
