

## **Donald Trump's Foreign Policy: Early Implications for New Zealand**

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Robert Ayson  
Victoria University of Wellington  
robert.ayson@vuw.ac.nz

At this moment in time Donald Trump's Presidency is 11 days and 12 hours old. By my calculation that is less than 1 per cent of a normal four-year term.

This should alert us to the hazards of making straight-line projections on the basis of what we have seen since the 20<sup>th</sup> of January .

We should remember that the Trump Administration remains incomplete with some Cabinet nominees still awaiting Senate confirmation.

And we simply can't know now the full range of challenges and opportunities that the wider world will be presenting between now and 2020 to Mr Trump and his colleagues.

Quite what happens to America and to us in the remaining 99 per cent of Mr Trump's first term of office remains unclear.

My hesitancy may strike you as strange. After all, we already know that some of Mr Trump's controversial campaign rhetoric is becoming much more than that.

Executive Orders and Presidential Memoranda are now part of Mr Trump's expanded array of options as the holder of the world's most powerful elected office. He's not just been tweeting stuff. He's been doing stuff.

With an early stroke of his pen the new President cancelled America's involvement in the Trans-Pacific Partnership. Years of challenging regional negotiations suddenly ended on the cutting room floor of US domestic politics.

Mr Trump has set in motion the process for the repeal of Obamacare. This is no accidental choice. It was the signature piece of domestic policy innovation during his predecessor's two terms of office.

Trump's anti-Mexican rhetoric on the campaign trail has been followed by the breakdown in one of America's most important bilateral relationships. A political wall is already in place well before a physical one gets built.

And fears that climate change mitigation would disappear as an American priority seem to have been fulfilled by its disappearance from the White House

website. Climate change has become a non-person, a fact too uncomfortable to be acknowledged.

And I hardly need remind you about the most controversial step of all. That's the Executive Order entitled 'Protection of the Nation from Foreign Terrorists into the United States.'

*The New York Times* Editorial Board calls these restrictions on entry to the United States 'bigoted, cowardly, self-defeating policy'. The *Washington Post* equivalent has branded this as 'a train wreck of decision-making'.

In erecting a travel fortress against citizens from seven Middle Eastern countries and Syrian refugees the Trump team have achieved something quite remarkable. The new Administration's first international crisis is one all of its own making.

It is a drama playing out in the domestic politics of several of America's partners. Its not been an easy time for leaders who have given the appearance of wanting to soften their criticism of the new Administration in the hope of building a strong relationship with those who now govern the world's most powerful country.

So not a great start for Mr Trump on the world stage you would say. And you would be right. But what we haven't seen yet is something that will undoubtedly come at some stage. A crisis driven not by the elevation of anti-Muslim populism into an Executive Order. But a crisis which results from external provocation, misunderstanding or disaster.

All Administrations go through these. Just think of George W. Bush's first term and the impact of 9/11 on his presidency and US foreign policy. Or think of how the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the Iranian hostage crisis spelled the end for Jimmy Carter. Or think of the escalating problems in Crimea and Syria and the challenges these posed for the Obama Administration's foreign policy.

We're only 1 per cent along the way. But at some point Mr Trump and his team will be tested. It could be a provocation from North Korea. It could be a significant terrorist attack in Europe. Despite the warm fuzzies between Trump and Putin, it could be a Russian response to NATO's increased deployments in what used to be called Eastern Europe.

It could be a test from Beijing designed to challenge Mr Trump's flirtations with a two China policy or Secretary of State Tillerson's robust language on preventing China's access to features in the South China Sea.

I am hoping for a good-bad crisis. A crisis bad enough to require America's attention but which somehow demands that the Trump team reach out to allies and partners, and potential adversaries, for their cooperation.

A crisis that reminds the new President that there is a reason why we have the United Nations and international agreements and norms.

A crisis where Mr Trump realizes the importance of the daily briefings the intelligence community wants him to get, and where he sees the value that America's diplomats bring to the table. And a crisis where he decides that the kitchen cabinet of Bannon, Kushner, Flynn, Conway, and Priebus needs to give way to a real one.

### **The Trump Foreign Policy**

So there is still room to hope that things can improve. But rather than speculate on what might happen, we are required to make an early assessment of the Trump foreign policy. And to New Zealand eyes at least, what we see so far is not pretty.

The first observation I would make is just how elevated domestic political issues are in Mr Trump's vision of the rest of the world. That is to me the real sense of 'America first.'

I tell my students that foreign policy begins at home. Those of us who study international relations and strategic studies often overlook the importance of domestic factors. But under Trump I think the domestic factor is magnified.

We are of course used to seeing America view the world through an American lens. That should not surprise us.

But here there is almost no view of the world happening. The world is not so much seen but obscured through a lens of the variety of American populism which Trump has mobilized and been mobilized by. That is one explanation for Steve Bannon's elevation onto the National Security Council and the demotion of officials whose counsel the President really needs.

The second observation is that America first is also America only. Its interests are not global ones. They are American interests which are primarily for American consumption.

There is a telling portion in Mr Trump's inaugural address which reads as follows:

"We will seek friendship and goodwill with the nations of the world -- but we do so with the understanding that it is the right of all nations to put their own interests first. We do not seek to impose our way of life on anyone, but rather to let it shine as an example for everyone to follow."

This is not just a repudiation of American intervention to promote democracy, in line with Trump's criticisms of US policy in the Middle East, and his challengeable claim that he did not endorse the 2003 war against Iraq.

Instead, everyone in Trump's universe looks after themselves first. There is, by definition, no such thing as a global perspective or a global interest. And global values don't really exist either.

A third observation follows from these. If the world is full of actors putting their own interests first, this is what international relations consists of.

In the past we have had rather sterile debates between two views of international cooperation. Some scholars are more optimistic and believe that countries will cooperate even when they realise others may be gaining more: if everyone is benefiting that is enough. To some extent this view underpins a lot of trade negotiation, climate change negotiation, arms control negotiation, peace treaties and so on.

And then some other scholars believe that countries become nervous when they realise others are gaining more from the cooperation than they are. All countries in this situation are locked in competition even when they are cooperating. This makes cooperation fleeting and defection from bargains more likely. All agreements become fragile and it is almost as if institutions do not really exist.

Trump appears to bring an extreme and almost perverse form of the second argument to his view of the world.

There are doubts about how much America will commit to NATO if smaller members are not seen to pay their way.

As well as scrapping the TPP, NAFTA is suspect because America's partners have been ripping off the American worker.

And Trump's views on the United Nations would make President George W. Bush seem like any Secretary General's best friend.

What seems especially absent in Trump's worldview is a recognition of the broader benefits that international cooperation has meant for America's position in the world.

Some might argue that what we have come to call the liberal international order is a veneer for American international primacy. But if that is what it takes to convince a Trump Administration of the virtues of global governance, then I say so be it.

It was to America's advantage to see the postwar emergence of economic and financial institutions such as the GATT and the IMF and the World Bank. That did not make these multilateral endeavours disadvantageous to others. Indeed smaller powers such as New Zealand stood to gain even more.

But that we did benefit did not somehow turn the United States into a loser. Yet that is the philosophical extension of Trump's logic. He's not a zero-sum thinker, almost a negative-sum thinker.

Likewise the American alliance systems in postwar Europe and Asia called on disproportionate contributions from Washington. But that was not because

Washington was duped into signing bad deals which only benefitted the free riders. As the leading provider of global public goods Washington was furnishing for itself an unparalleled leadership position.

That's not in the Trump view of history.

But the last several decades of America's international primacy paint a clear picture. You can't sustain the number one position in the world simply by having the world's biggest and most energetic economy with all the jobs that were supposedly stolen by other countries returning to America.

Nor can you have it by throwing even more funding in your armed forces, even if these are indisputably the world's most advanced and even if you are willing to countenance a new round of nuclear arms racing.

American primacy is not a number. It has not been like the size of the crowd at the inauguration – the biggest we have ever seen, apparently. Or the size of the President's election win – a landslide, apparently. Or the size of other things - apparently.

### **Killing Globalisation?**

An essential ingredient to this leadership is the ability to lead international cooperation. And that takes us back to the TPP. Views on whether the TPP would benefit New Zealand where it really matters have remained mixed in the debate here partly because people use different indexes of what really counts. In America it became so much of a hot potato for Hillary Clinton that she had to pretend that she didn't like it anymore.

I have to admit to you that I have never read even a portion of the TPP's enormous contents. But I do know this. Along with other smaller and medium negotiating partners, New Zealand believes that it cannot get where it wants to go without trade and investment cooperation. This includes bilateral FTAs, including the ones we have with Australia and China. And it includes plurilateral arrangements which is what the TPP would have become.

Moreover New Zealand and other countries view great power involvement in these arrangements as a sign of the willingness of these larger countries to offer a form of leadership.

Or to reverse the story, if a great power knows that smaller economies put a premium on trade and investment cooperation, their involvement in these deals provides them with a prospect of regional influence. It is the job of New Zealand and others to find ways to ensure that their influence is responsible.

I've long bemoaned the tendency of New Zealand politicians, especially in recent times, to treat foreign policy as a variety of trade policy. We have been too commercially focused. But that said, if there was one thing that Washington

could do to cement its regional credentials in Wellington's eyes it was to endorse the TPP. That moment has now passed.

And it gets worse. It would be easier if Trump's opposition to multi-country free trade agreements such as TPP was simply because of populist judgements which play to his base about bringing back jobs. But there is also a broader point here. One extension of the size matters philosophy is that while Trump instead wants a series of bilateral deals, it is almost as if smaller economies need not apply.

Part of the criticism is that wider and more inclusive groupings allows smaller countries too much influence, pushing larger powers like America into concessions they don't need to offer. If the Trump Administration proceeds on this basis and conducts a review of America's participation in multilateralism more generally then we had all better watch out.

That would be a direct challenge to New Zealand's interests. We have invested much of our diplomatic capital into the international institutions that allow us to have a voice but which also reduce the chances that international relations will be a law of the jungle dominated by great power competition.

And America has been there at the creation of so many of these parts of the liberal international order. If Washington was to instead become a chief adversary of those order-building institutions, a fundamental crisis for New Zealand's foreign policy would ensue.

I genuinely believe that some of Trump's inner circle would have no problem if their desire to challenge the Washington establishment led them to tear down the fabric of international order which they see as globalist indulgences.

And I also believe that Mr Trump would have little concern if the global economy suffered in overall terms so long as he could say to his voters, that America was winning. That is the international side of America First.

### **China to the Rescue?**

What better competition to this negative sum game logic than to argue that globalisation has actually been a positive feature of international affairs?

Isn't there an opportunity for one of America's international competitors to steal the march in the knowledge the world will be looking for a new great power champion of free trade?

That appears to have been the conclusion that Xi Jinping has drawn. Even before Trump gave his allegiance to the US constitution before the hugest crowd the world has ever seen, the Chinese leader was making just that pitch at Davos. Clever politics I think.

You might say that the new emperor doesn't have many clothes. We keep hearing stories about the fragility of China's economic picture. But China remains

an essential trading partner for so many of us in the Asia-Pacific. And competition for the position of globalisation champion is sparse.

If Beijing plays its cards right, and limits its own tendency to allow domestic political factors to drive an more assertive foreign policy, it may achieve the status that Bob Zoellick mysteriously suggested some year ago. Especially against the backdrop of a volatile and damaging Trump Presidency, China could assume the mantle of responsible stakeholder.

But to do so would require more than an endorsement of globalisation at a time when that word is poison to the Bannons, Farages, and Le Pens of this world. It would require China to show real restraint should Mr Trump decide that tariffs and other escalatory economic measures need to be enacted and not just talked about. At that point it will be China's call on whether a bilateral trade war ensues.

On the security side, being a responsible stakeholder would demand special restraint from Beijing should the Trump Administration start playing the Taiwan card, or turn freedom of navigation operations into an attempted quarantine. For domestic political reasons as much as anything else, that would be very challenging for Xi and the Communist Party of China.

If that restraint came, I'd expect it would mean many more countries in Asia would countenance bandwaggoning with Beijing especially if America's commitment to the region was proving a mix of neglect and over-reaction. China's sphere of influence could well expand.

But like the rest of the region New Zealand would be looking for other forms of reassurance. I can't help think that we will be spending a good deal of our time not just thinking about what America is doing (or not doing) and how China may be taking advantage of the volatility. I expect we will want to be caucusing with our other key partners in the region.

That means Australia and Singapore and Canada. It means thinking about how Japan and South Korea see things. It means thinking about new and emerging security partnerships as well. How will Vietnam, Indonesia, and India respond?

It means investing time in our relationships in Europe which I think will bear the brunt of a fair bit of the Trump animosity: that is after all where so many of the globalists come from. Some of them even still will survive Brexit in Britain.

Ballast is going to be needed and I expect new coalitions to form which will place new demands on New Zealand's bilateral diplomacy. And we can only expect that if Washington expects less from itself and even more from allies and partners (who have apparently been shirking) we are going to be doing more in our part of the world. That most likely means even more with Australia, including in the South Pacific.

## **Beyond Orange**

What we can't afford to do is spend all of our time being mesmerised by Donald Trump. That is exactly what the last several months have been for US politics. The stream of tweets, pronouncements, insults and executive orders seem calculated to keep everyone off balance, unable to digest the shock of the last salvo because the next one has already arrived.

And what we can't afford to do is let our view of the United States be dominated by the new President. That's not as easy as it sounds. His approach is not so much America first as Trump first.

But his low popularity numbers suggest that he does not speak for as many Americans as he thinks he does. The protests which have erupted over the travel restrictions, the dissent position circulating around the State Department, and signs of friction with the Republican Party, all suggest an important point.

It is this. To treat Donald Trump as the embodiment of enduring American values would be a travesty. To see him as the logical extension of an America which sometimes goes overboard in its desire to lead the world would also be a mistake.

We all know Americans who do not share his view of America or of the world.

We know that there are many American officials who see value in international cooperation. We know that they were there when the Obama Administration decided that the first part of the rebalance was for America to participate more fully in East Asian multilateral cooperation by way of the East Asia Summit.

We know an America that like all great powers is capable of error. And like all other countries, including New Zealand, is capable of hypocrisy. But to view America through the lens of Donald Trump's view of America and the world is to let alternative facts become our own vantage point.

At the same time he is the new Commander in Chief. He is the leader of the world's most powerful and influential country. He chooses if and when America launches nuclear weapons. So it is not as if other countries, including New Zealand, can pretend that he is not President.

That would not be an alternative fact. That would be a dangerous alternative reality.

There will still be many opportunities for New Zealand officials to work with like-minded officials in Washington. In some parts of the US system, including the intelligence and diplomatic worlds, they'll need our support and understanding.

And it would be an error to assume that a Trump Administration will always over-react even though I think there is every likelihood it will do so on more than one important occasion.



Moments of pragmatism will emerge, even if the new President does not want to talk about democracy as a global value. And even if his relationship with someone as inspiring as Angela Merkel is as frosty as Mr Obama's was with someone as questionable as Mr Putin.

## **NZ-US Relations**

One of the biggest challenges for our diplomats is to ensure that New Zealand's interests in an effective relationship with the United States is maintained under three conditions.

One is the inexperience of so much of the Trump team on foreign policy.

A second is the radical departures from American foreign policy consensus that some of Mr Trump's immediate advisors will be suggesting.

A third is the temptation of arguments in the wider international debate that it is somehow possible to bypass Washington as an important partner.

I think Bob Hawke is right to argue that right now is not the time to isolate America even if it seems that this is what Mr Trump is doing to his country.

We know that a Trump Administration will not be talking about the pivot or rebalance to Asia. That is Obama-Clinton speak which will be redacted from the websites.

And some of the factors which have encouraged Washington to seek a closer partnership with New Zealand may change.

But if Trump solves the situation in Afghanistan and in Iraq, everyone will be surprised. A miracle will have happened. But more likely is a situation where the US will continue to have to work in partnership.

We should not expect everything will change. The momentum that has built up in the US-NZ defence relationship will not suddenly come to a screaming halt. And the demise of the TPP will not kill off the US-NZ trading relationship that has been built up over the many decades without it.

Long-standing friends have every right to disagree and to do that publically.

Some of the Trump positions are and will be an affront to our values and our interests. There may be particular moments of concern and moral hazard.

That could come if Mr Trump feels emboldened to rewrite the American rules of the game on the use of force, on respect for the civil liberties of minority groups, on the freedom of expression, on the treatment of captured insurgents, and so on.

But we need to believe that there will be chances for America to turn things around. We need to recall that while 11 and a half days is a long time in politics, the next four years will pass.

None of this will be easy. Some of our assumptions about the way the United States will want to lead need to change because it is not clear how much a Trump Administration will want to lead internationally.

New Zealand will not be able to assume that for the next 4 years America's commitment to international institutions will be nearly as significant as it has been for much of the postwar period.

We have even more reason now, if we were not doing so already, to question the confidence some have had that Asia's many decades of great power peace will survive. We do not know quite how China will adjust its calculations of American resolve and what that will mean for the pressures the region will face.

But will we still be an economic, military, intelligence, and diplomatic partner of the United States in four years time? I think so.

There will be moments where the New Zealand government will need to distance itself from the Trump Administration. It will need to be willing to do this in public as well as in private, not least because New Zealanders need to know that their government is aware of the values and interests it is charged to protect.

That distancing is not just about criticism. If someone else is tearing down the fabric of international society, calling them out for it does not negate the damage or create something in its place.

We need to be working with others to ensure that the damage Mr Trump does is minimized. And along with the rest of the world we need to keep effective relations going with our United States connections to ensure that the damage can be repaired.

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