

Australia and Trump's America: problems and perspectives

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Professor Curran examines the nature of Australia's response to Donald Trump's first year in the White House. He questions Canberra's emphasis on sentimentalism and says Canberra needs to come to terms with a changed America. He also assesses the ongoing debate within America on the direction of United States foreign policy and concludes that close allies need to re-think their perception of American staying power.

Key words: Australia; United States; Donald Trump; foreign policy; foreign relations.

Now that the Prime Minister has returned from his February 2018 visit to Washington, it seems an opportune time to offer some initial judgements about how Australia has handled the first year of the Trump administration, and to look in more depth at what the first year of the Trump presidency can reveal about America's direction.

In doing so it is worth recalling the sense of trepidation which understandably greeted Trump's election in November 2016. His rhetoric on the campaign trail had included some lurid prescriptions when it came to American foreign policy. He was going to demand that close allies in Asia, especially South Korea and Japan, stump up more for the cost of housing and feeding United States (US) troops stationed there. He talked of both those allies potentially needing to go nuclear, of starting a trade war with China, and he threatened withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership. That was a threat he did make good on, and this year is also likely to see a ramping up of US efforts to redress its massive trade imbalance with Beijing.

Even though Australia had witnessed this kind of doubt and anxiety before about US staying power in Asia, most notably with the enunciation of President Nixon's Guam doctrine of 25 July 1969 – when Nixon asked Asian allies to stand more on their own two feet in terms of self-defence – Trump nevertheless rattled Australian geopolitical faiths in a different way. He appeared to be impulsive, erratic, difficult to predict. He had no real knowledge of Australia; seemingly no appreciation for the history of the relationship. His style upon entering the White House gave form to such concerns: it was chaotic and chronically ad hoc. With some exceptions, it continues to be.

The Australia–United States Relationship

All of these concerns were borne out in that first, now infamous, phone call between Trump and Turnbull on 28 January 2017. Many of the anxieties about what Trump might mean for the US-Australia alliance came to the fore in the public reaction here to that abrupt exchange between the two leaders.

The response here was in some ways curious. In my view, never has so much been made of so little. Alliance true believers had spent the last two decades talking about a relationship that was 'stronger than it has ever been'. And yet some terse words from the US commander-in-chief witnessed a strange outpouring of hysterical alarm. How could the president talk to a close US ally like this?

But remember, Trump had been elected on a platform of getting tough on immigration and asking allies to do more for the US – and yet here was our prime minister in an introductory call asking him to honour an Obama era deal that would see the US taking some of Australia's refugees from Manus Island and Nauru. In the screams of panic from the press and some commentators was revealed once more the brittle nature of Australia's alliance sensitivities, not to mention the collective amnesia that has engulfed the history of this relationship with the United States.

That reaction, which talked about the alliance being in crisis, with some commentators even discussing the need for a 'Plan B' for Australia in facing the region and China without the alliance, also revealed just how easily forgotten are the far more serious moments of divergence the country has had with the US. How easily it is forgotten that so irritable did Gough Whitlam become to Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger that in 1974 the White House considered cutting off our intelligence feed, terminating military exercises with Australia, and, crucially, looking at options for relocating its intelligence installations at Pine Gap and North West Cape

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elsewhere. Had the Americans followed through on these steps, the alliance would have been left as little more than a brittle chrysalis.

Employing Sentiment to Steady the Alliance

But back to Trump. The Australian government steadied its Alliance ship last year, quite literally, aboard the USS *Intrepid* in New York, even though the two leaders in their private encounter reportedly spoke about nothing else other than business mates in common and respective social media strategies. And yet the Australian response to Trump took a more concrete form on this occasion – shower the president in sentiment and in so doing give him a lesson about alliances, show him what they have been able to do when threatened with an existential crisis. By all reports, it seemed to work.

It might be said, therefore, that Australia – along with Japan – is writing the rule book for how close US allies might deal with the Trump White House. Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe has his nose in front in this regard – rushing to New York immediately after Trump's election, and ultimately managing also to revive Washington's interest in a quadrilateral security dialogue with Japan, India and Australia to send a diplomatic warning to China.

But the question has to be asked as to whether this use of sentiment is an appropriate response to the United States in this era. What has Australia really gained from talking about '100 years of mateship'? The prime minister heralded '100 more years of mateship'. He may, of course, be right. But I wonder how wise it is to talk this language at a time when US policy is in a state of such flux, and when the need is so pressing for Australia to chart its own course in a region that is so rapidly changing. We are talking the language of absolute loyalty when our diplomacy could perhaps be a little more subtle, nimble and agile.

The Problem with Employing Sentiment

The problem as I see it is that the outpouring of sentiment is overwhelming the analytical necessity to understand a changed America. Australian prime ministers and foreign ministers are talking about the US they grew up with – the America of Kennedy, Reagan and Clinton – the America that sees itself as the 'indispensable' nation – not the US that is being buffeted by strong protectionist headwinds; and not the US that is suffering from a crisis of self-belief and self-confidence. This president does not talk the language of the *Pax Americana*. He has no time for democracy promotion or divine providence.

'100 years of mateship' is the crudest kind of historical slogan for the Australian-American relationship. But is entirely in keeping with the way in which, since late last century, the alliance has been fused

with the Anzac legend, thus placing it atop a pedestal and virtually beyond criticism. The slogan paints a picture of unending military partnership across the 20th century and into this one. It depicts an Australia that has been and will always be there. And it reduces the relationship to a caricature. It would certainly be interesting to know what the Chinese make of it.

Was it the act of a mate, however, when Woodrow Wilson in May 1917 proposed to requisition the merchant ships that Australia had ordered and paid for from America – they were to carry Australian wheat and flour to Britain and its allies – a move which Billy Hughes, with the kind of truculence and arrogance that only he could muster, called an 'unfriendly act'?

Was it the act of mate when Douglas MacArthur told the British envoy in Tokyo in mid 1948 that Australians were 'chauvinistic and short sighted', a people who, 'tucked away as they were in one corner of the Pacific, did not appreciate world values'?

Was it the act of a mate when John F. Kennedy told Australian external affairs minister Garfield Barwick in October 1963 that the US would only offer logistical assistance if they came into conflict with Indonesian forces during the Confrontation crisis with Malaysia?

Was it the act of a mate when LBJ² did not consult John Gorton about a bombing halt in North Vietnam in 1968, causing Gorton to fume privately to a senior Australian journalist that this was 'no way to treat an ally'.

Would Billy McMahon have called Nixon a 'mate' after the US president left him stranded by announcing he would visit China, even though Australia had for two decades been at pains to co-ordinate its own China policy with that of Washington?

Was Nixon's refusal to extend an invitation to Gough Whitlam for nearly five months in 1973, on account of Whitlam's criticism of the 1972 Christmas bombings of Hanoi and Haiphong, the act of a 'mate'?

Would Bob Hawke have seen US trade policies that so hurt Australian farmers in the 1980s as the act of a mate?

Finally, did Alexander Downer and John Howard see President Clinton's refusal to provide US ground troops for the East Timor operation in 1999 as an act of mateship? Granted, the US provided crucial diplomatic muscle, intelligence and logistical assistance, not to mention an over-the-horizon military presence. But Downer and Howard, conditioned by an insurance premium view of the relationship – Australia in their eyes had paid their dues [Howard told Clinton this] – expected marines to be deployed alongside our diggers.

²US President Lyndon Baines Johnson

I do not recite these episodes to catalogue a litany of grievance against the US, or to offer up a hymn of anti-Americanism. It is nothing of the sort – it is simply to say that the US and Australian world-views and interests have on occasion necessarily diverged. The same argument could of course be made about America's relations with Britain, Japan and any number of countries. It is inherent to alliances.

This is the problem, then, with the simplistic, hackneyed and jingoistic recital of '100 years of mateship'. I will concede that it rings nicely in American ears and might fit nicely on the little badges that the Australian Ambassador has apparently had made for the various events marking this year's centenary – but again, it needs to be asked: what does Australia really gain from it?

What did Australia really gain from its commitment to the American cause in Vietnam? All the major decisions about American withdrawal and the peace terms with the enemy were made without consulting Australia. Similarly, what did Australia gain from its commitment to the US invasion of Iraq in 2003? John Howard would say the Free Trade Agreement, of course. Yet Canada and New Zealand did not join the war in Iraq and did not suffer any great blowback from Washington, at least nothing that was not easily bearable.

The more important task is to come to terms with a changing America. And by continuing this sentimental turn, we risk missing some of the tectonic forces that move beneath the surface of political events.

The Direction of United States Foreign Policy

Since Donald Trump's election to the presidency the most common critique of his foreign policy is that it undermines the liberal international order which has been the basis for prosperity and stability across much of the western world for the last 70 years. Whether it be his scepticism towards the US alliance system in Europe and Asia, his withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership and the Paris Climate Change accords, or his attacks on the United Nations and other multilateral institutions, President Trump is perceived by many as posing a direct threat to the system of global governance established by the US in the wake of World War II.

This criticism of Trump often conceals a deeper, more serious charge: that, by undermining the liberal international order, he is actually diluting the legitimating power of the American idea itself, the core set of beliefs about the US's self-image and its role in the world – worse, that he is hastening the relative decline of the US as a global power.

That Trump himself does not use the language of *Pax Americana*, the conviction that the US has a special mission to redeem humanity, has only added

to the prevailing sense of unease amongst many in America and overseas. In his acceptance speech as the Republican nominee, he proclaimed that 'Americanism, not globalism, will be our credo'. That he regularly attacks the institutions and traditions of American democracy itself, challenges the very idea that the US is a model for other societies to follow.

The perception that something is sorely amiss at the heart of the national psyche – that the US 'has lost faith in its own superiority' – has prompted an outpouring of attempts to diagnose and remedy this latest bout of malaise. The distinguished historian David McCullough introduced a recent collection of his speeches by expressing the hope that it might remind his fellow citizens "in this time of uncertainty and contention, of just who we are and what we stand for" (McCullough 2017: xiv). A rollcall of the nation's most esteemed foreign policy thinkers laments the loss of US credibility and prestige. The "great global story of our age", writes Fareed Zakaria, is the "decline of American influence ... a decline of its desire and capacity to use [its] power to shape the world" (Zakaria 2017).

Too often, however, this state of affairs is sheeted home entirely to the coming of Donald Trump to Washington. Never mind the grave damage already done to the liberal international order by the US-led pre-emptive strike on Iraq in 2003. As Harvard scholar Joseph Nye observed, "even when its power was greatest, Washington could not prevent the 'loss' of China, the partition of Germany and Berlin, a draw in Korea, Soviet suppression of insurrections within its own bloc, the creation and survival of a communist regime in Cuba, and failure in Vietnam" (Nye 2017).

'Make America Great Again'

But how does this critique square with Trump's stated desire to 'make America great again'? As president, Trump has adopted more conventional foreign policy stances. In his speeches and statements, the president channels Ronald Reagan's mantra of 'peace through strength'; and he has said he wants to mimic the French by parading the nation's military hardware down Pennsylvania Avenue on American Independence Day. Launching his administration's *National Security Strategy* (US Government 2017) – a document which can be seen as an attempt to reconcile the views he espoused as candidate with those he now extols from the Oval Office – Trump affirmed again that "America is in the game and America is going to win", adding that "America will lead again" (Donald Trump, 18 December 2017). Pentagon spending remains lavish, and late last year, Trump approved a 'persistent campaign of direct action' against countries where Islamic militants are operating, thus dispensing with the stricter vetting processes in place under Obama.

He has also armed Ukrainian rebels and tweeted in support of young Iranians protesting against the regime in Tehran. These are not the policies of a president setting the US on a course of global retreat.

Other steps Trump has taken as President also seem to cut against this prevailing critique. Earlier in his term, Trump ordered air strikes on Syria and then, having been dissuaded from his original intention to withdraw from the war in Afghanistan, committed more US troops there – with ‘no artificial timelines’. Parts of the US alliance system in both Europe and Asia might have shuddered at the prospect of a Trump presidency, but NATO not only survives, it grows: Trump has supported the addition of Montenegro to its ranks. In Seoul and Tokyo, political leaders and officials now marvel at an American commander-in-chief talking the language of solidarity and shared sacrifice, words they could only have dreamt of hearing from this president 12 months ago. Where China was once the ‘economic bogeyman’ ‘raping’ America, Trump hails his relationship with Xi Jinping at the same time as labelling the country a ‘revisionist power’. On North Korea, the president’s sporadic bellicosity often cools to calls for collective action in meeting the threat posed by Pyongyang. And at home, the system of checks and balances in the US political system have largely worked in pushing back against some of the administration’s more contentious policies.

Domestic Grievances versus Ongoing American Progress

Still, the domestic grievances that brought Trump to power do seem to portend a longer-term shift in how America views and performs in the world. It is likely, too, that Trump will be followed by another populist figure from either the left or the right, either in three years or eight. These forces, in particular those that express antagonism towards globalisation, alienation from and antipathy to Congress, not to mention the deep resentment at the blood and treasure expended on attempts to transform Iraq and Afghanistan into democratic havens in the Middle East, have tarnished that tradition of exceptionalism which embodies a more ambitious American global posture.

Not surprisingly, then, the Trump presidency has given rise to yet another wave of gloomy prognostications about American decline. In the words of one analysis, Trump by “taking a sledgehammer” to the international order is “ceding the future to the very same aggressive powers, especially the authoritarian regimes of China and Russia, that he purports to protect Americans from” (Anon. 2017). The comparison so often made between the chaos and dysfunction of Trump’s White

House and the tightening power grip of Chinese president Xi Jinping is taken as almost irrefutable proof that China will soon remove the US from its hegemonic perch.

But some analysts see Trump as nothing more than a mere interloper in the saga of American progress, though by all means a disruptive one. Many of them assume that once he has left the scene normal programming will resume, that the US will once more assume the mantle that its special providence has bequeathed to it. They console themselves with the thought that the naysayers about the US have been proved wrong before – most particularly in the 1980s following the harrowing experience of Vietnam and the toxicity of Watergate – and so will be again. And they reaffirm that, just as in the past, America will once again renew and replenish.

They may, of course, be right: the US economy has recently recorded a 3 per cent growth rate; and with rising business confidence, low-cost energy in abundance, and a new wave of digital innovation in the offing, the American dream could well be rebuilt.

Trump’s Vision versus Imperial Hubris

To underline just how significant is the lack of the ideal of the *Pax Americana* in Trump’s vision, one need only recall that the United States has, in the past, paid high economic and human costs for the commitment to its national ideals. For a quarter of a century after the coming to power of the communists in China, Washington refused to recognise the regime, regarding its rise to power as a betrayal of the Chinese people who had thereby become enslaved to Moscow. The Americans treated the People’s Republic of China as a pariah nation and banned Americans from any contact or connection with the country, including economic ties such as trade and investment. Since their allies, including Australia, would not agree to such extreme self-denying measures and continued to trade profitably with Beijing, America paid a high price for being true to what its national ideals dictated. Likewise, the Americans suffered great losses of lives and treasure in the Vietnam War which they fought in the name of freedom to keep the Communist bloc at bay. There was no material interest which could have justified paying such a price.

The United States now has a president, however, who is not given to proselytising that version of the American mission. So, for all Trump’s clarion calls about American ‘greatness’, it is likely that the US is going to have to accept more and more the disconnect between the allure of its national mythology and the limits of its capacity to effect transformational change abroad. This period, then, may well come to be seen as the first step in

preparing Americans for the end of global hegemony. Walter Russel Mead contends that Trump's coming may not be as "ill-suited to the country's needs as his most fervid detractors believe", primarily because he is bringing to the fore the harsh reality that the country's post-Cold War national security strategy has "run out of gas" (Mead 2017). Seen in this light, Trump is the president America had to have: a leader immune to the siren song of grandiose globalism, a commander-in-chief who appears to grasp that the US can no longer succumb to the dangers of imperial hubris.

China's Rise and America's Self Image

China's rise, however, presents the idea of American exceptionalism with an altogether different challenge. It is difficult to see a US president or national security adviser developing a strategy to accommodate Chinese power – even though it is more and more apparent that the US ultimately may have to do so, albeit grudgingly. Still, it is worth recalling that the scholars and commentators who in the 1970s predicted US decline, then witnessed the rebirth of American purpose under Reagan and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union. Communist China is by no means about to collapse, but it could face substantial demographic, environmental and social challenges in the years ahead, challenges that may well work to America's long-term advantage. In the current debate over the rise of China and the challenge it presents to the US in Asia, American strengths are almost routinely underplayed.

The question worth bearing in mind here, however, is what kinds of societies keep their balance amidst such turmoil? Despite the rancour and the open feuding between the White House and the Congress, the courts and the media, the US is steering a relatively steady course through this particular period of political turbulence. Trump will face yet more spirited resistance, but absent a serious catalyst for impeachment, he will serve a full term and perhaps, should his base keep the faith, be re-elected.

Equally, it hardly needs pointing out that a war, or a major terrorist attack on American soil, would turn much of my analysis on its head. Such an event would rouse once more the deep exceptionalist impulse in America's view of itself and the world. Absent such a crisis, however, some like Robert Kagan concede that "there will be more damage [to America's standing in the world] under Trump. If we are in this mood, Trump or his successor may not be able to turn the ship around. The trough may be too deep or long. And it may be difficult to recover unless there is a war" (Kagan 2016). Gideon Rose, when I interviewed him in New York on 15 September 2017, suggested that Trump "has complicated significantly the job of the next president in restoring and updating the liberal

international order ... that job will be harder because many abroad, especially US allies, will be wondering if the US is even committed to it".

Conclusion

Trump's style, erratic behaviour and impulsiveness ensure that doubts about the US will persist. As a result, close allies will need to think about American staying power differently. And their ears will need to be more finely attuned to the anger and frustration pouring out of middle America, along with the kinds of repercussions that has on Washington's self-confidence and capacity. Right now, the United States has a president who brandishes the country's fatigue with both mythological and military overstretch.

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