

NEW ZEALAND-U.S. RELATIONS IN THE TRUMP ERA AND BEYOND

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New Zealand interests and values are challenged by the Trump administration's worldview, and a two-track New Zealand policy is recommended in response.

Key findings

- New Zealand and the Trump team have basically different conceptions of changing global order.
- The Trump administration's apparent indifference to a liberal international order has implications for New Zealand foreign policy in terms of human rights, trade policy, security and a rules-based system
- A two-track policy towards the Trump administration would be consistent with a constructive but independent New Zealand foreign policy

Executive summary

What is the problem?

There appears to be a fundamental tension between the Trump administration's skeptical worldview, which emphasizes resistance to globalization and multilateral institutions – particularly in relation to immigration, trade and governance – and a 'transformationalist' New Zealand foreign policy perspective that views globalization as a major structural change, driven by technology, which has largely served as an enabling factor in advancing New Zealand's interests and values within the framework of an international liberal order.

What should be done?

In relations with the Trump administration, the New Zealand government should strike a balance between defending core national concerns such as a rules-based international order, human rights, and the expansion of free trade, and, where possible, strengthening co-operation if there are broad areas of policy agreement like supporting the international coalition against ISIS or countering nuclear proliferation in North Korea. The key advantage of this two-track approach is that it maintains the



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possibility of improving ties with a Trump administration without compromising New Zealand's interests and values in the process.

NZ-US Relations in Trump Era

Donald Trump's successful bid for the White House in November 2016 has raised the deeper question of whether we are witnessing the erosion of a liberal international order. This system of governance is closely associated with globalization¹, and can be understood as an open and rules-based order enshrined in institutions such as the United Nations and norms like multilateralism. It is worth emphasising that opposition to globalization was arguably the foremost policy theme in Trump's election campaign. More specifically, the Trump administration's early actions cut across four aspects of New Zealand's foreign policy posture. First, in terms of national identity, and at a time when New Zealand has redefined itself in the world itself by recognising the special constitutional and cultural position of Maori people and expanding ties with the Asia-Pacific, Mr. Trump's brand of nationalism appears to have weakened America's commitment to international human rights and the rule of law. President Trump has attempted to introduce a temporary travel ban against citizens from 7 Middle Eastern countries and exclude Syrian refugees, re-affirmed his commitment to build a border wall with Mexico, and begun the process of repealing the Affordable Health Care Act, which extended health care insurance to 20 million disadvantaged Americans.

Second, since a programme of radical reform in the mid-1980s had made the New Zealand economy one of the most open in the developed world, all New Zealand governments have identified trade liberalization as a crucial ingredient in increasing the country's economic growth and prosperity. However, the new Trump administration does not seem to share this goal. In January 2017, Washington announced its withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP).² This was a major blow to Wellington. Historically, New Zealand governments have been trying for years to secure a bilateral free trade agreement with Washington, and played a leadership role in advancing the idea of the TPP, a multilateral trade agreement encompassing the US and 11 other states from the Asia-Pacific region.

Third, the advent of the Trump administration has the potential to complicate New Zealand's much improved security relationship with the US. While Prime Minister Bill English supported President Trump's missile strike against the Assad regime following the illegal use of chemical weapons in the Syrian civil war and welcomes greater diplomatic co-ordination between the President Trump and China's President Xi Jinping in curbing the nuclear weapons ambitions of the Kim Jong Un's regime in North Korea, the absence of a coherent strategic vision in Trump's White House is disconcerting for an ally like New Zealand. President Trump's tactical opportunism – in the space of five months in office he has changed his mind on NATO, the EU, China, Syria and Russia – raises troubling questions about American support for commitments like the New Zealand deployment of 143 military personnel in Iraq, and the president's crisis management skills.

Fourth, New Zealand's 'can do' approach to diplomacy sits uncomfortably with the Trump administration's realpolitik. Unlike Britain and Australia, New Zealand has been less inclined in the post-Cold War era to believe that the liberal order (and globalization) is exclusively dependent on the power of the United States. But the Trump team seems to embody the view that "the strong rule where they can and the weak suffer what they must."³ In this context, the diplomatic task, for example, of managing New Zealand's close relationship with both US and China could become even more



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difficult with New Zealand and other countries facing the prospect of greater pressure to side with one superpower against another.

Why does this matter to New Zealand?

For New Zealand, the Trump administration's 'back to the future' foreign policy is a source of major concern. By challenging traditional symbols of power in the international system, such as geography and size, globalization over the last three decades has enhanced the possibilities for small states like New Zealand to participate in global forums and build new constituencies and coalitions in support of key national goals. The elevation of New Zealand citizens to leadership positions in international institutions, the successful utilisation of the WTO in trade disputes, New Zealand's refusal to back the US-led invasion of Iraq and the establishment of close relations with the world's two superpowers, America and China, all point to the fact that globalization has enhanced, not diminished, New Zealand's international reach.⁴

What Should New Zealand do?

Unlike the Trump team, New Zealand governments in the post-Cold War era tend to view globalization as an irreversible structural change in the world – characterised by instant communications and financial transactions across borders – in which all sovereign states are more interdependent and more vulnerable than previously.

How should New Zealand respond to the worldview of the Trump administration? For one thing, New Zealand must not abandon its core foreign policy beliefs centred on its support for the UN and a rules-based order that allows Wellington a voice in the international arena in the hope that it can reach a special relationship with the Trump administration. Unfortunately, there may already be some fraying here with the new New Zealand Foreign Minister, Gerry Brownlee apparently distancing himself from his government's previous co-sponsorship of UNSC 2334, which condemned Israel's programme of settlements in East Jerusalem and the West Bank.⁵ But the costs of such diplomatic manoeuvring far outweigh the benefits.

It should not be forgotten that differences over New Zealand non-nuclear security policy did not prevent eventual rapprochement between Wellington and Washington after 9/11. Besides, New Zealand has been generally adept at both exploiting the opportunities and minimising the constraints of a globalising world. This has been demonstrated by New Zealand's fruitful relations with the US and China. In contrast, the current leaders of the UK and Australia have already drawn criticism for being seen to be subservient to the Trump administration. While New Zealand should avoid tilting too heavily towards either the US or China, it must also continue to diversify its efforts to expand its relationships, particularly in the Asia Pacific. Such diversification helps to prevent a New Zealand fixation with the US-China relationship, and reminds the two superpowers that they are not the only shows in town as far as Wellington is concerned. Pressing ahead with the TPP without the US is one way of doing this.

At the same time, New Zealand should not allow its view of the United States to be dominated by the Trump administration. America was an important partner before the Trump administration and is likely to remain one during the post-Trump era. The two countries share democratic political values, significant economic ties, military and intelligence links and close social-cultural relations.



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In the circumstances, it makes sense for the New Zealand to pursue a two-track policy approach towards the Trump administration. On the one hand, Wellington could vigorously uphold its support for its core foreign policy goals. Having recently completed a high-profile two-year stint on the UNSC, it is important that New Zealand does not back off the foreign policy commitments it made there simply to appease the Trump administration. On the other hand, New Zealand should make it very clear that it wants a warm and cooperative relationship with Washington, and is prepared work hard to achieve that where there is common ground between the two sides.

Conclusion

While New Zealand government and the Trump administration differ in their views of the changing global order, it is entirely possible for Wellington to maintain friendly ties with Washington while frankly acknowledging some policy differences between them.

¹ Globalization is the term given to communication and information technologies in the 1980s – advances in personal commuting and the development of the internet – that have intensified links between societies, institutions, cultures and individuals on a worldwide basis. See Jan Aart Scholte, “The Globalization of World Politics” in John Baylis and Steve Smith (eds) *The Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, Second Edition, 2001), p. 14

² David Smith, ‘Trump withdraws from Trans-Pacific Partnership amid flurry of orders’ *The Guardian*, 23 January 2017: <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/jan/23/donald-trump-first-orders-trans-pacific-partnership-tpp>

³ This quotation is derived from Thucydides as part of the Melian Dialogue in *The Landmark Thucydides*, Edited by Robert B. Strassler, [Richard Crawley](#) translation, Annotated, Indexed and Illustrated (A Touchstone Book, New York, NY, 1996), 352/5.89

⁴ Robert G. Patman and Chris Rudd, ‘New Zealand Sovereignty under Siege?’ in Robert G. Patman and Chris Rudd (eds) *Sovereignty under Siege? Globalization and New Zealand* (Ashgate: Aldershot, 2005), p 232

⁵ ‘Brownlee wants to get Israel relationship on track’ *Newshub*, 23 May 2017:

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