

RE-CALIBRATING NEW ZEALAND'S CONGRESSIONAL OUTREACH STRATEGY IN THE DAYS OF TRUMP

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After the withdrawal of the United States as a signatory to the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) New Zealand altered its approach to Congressional outreach. The current approach reflects budgetary restraint, and may need recalibration to better account for the new US political environment.

Key findings

- New Zealand's engagement with the US Congress is an important hedge against unwanted actions by the US executive branch.
- During the campaign for passage of the TPP New Zealand gained many hard won relationships on Capitol Hill, those relationships should be maintained.
- The strategy for engaging Congress should be recalibrated to account for the current US political environment.

Executive summary

New Zealand's diplomacy with the US government faces a two-pronged challenge emanating from the election of President Trump. Many policies espoused by Trump stand in stark contrast with New Zealand's. Within days of being inaugurated the President withdrew the US as a signatory to the TPP. This upended years of diplomatic efforts, and leaving the NZ diplomatic mission with limited objectives. Following the TPP's demise the NZ Embassy in Washington restructured its Congressional outreach, shedding the outreach position, and distributing outreach responsibilities throughout the Embassy. The result is to load already busy diplomats with more tasks and complicating the job of Congressional relations.

To resolve this two-pronged challenge the New Zealand government should redouble its efforts to engage with the US Congress. Having spent years building relationships in pursuit first of a free trade agreement, and later the TPP, New Zealand should avoid letting the Congressional relationships erode. The NZ government should seek to expand its budget for diplomatic representation in the US and fund a full time diplomat to head Congressional relations, both to expand New Zealand's representation in Congress and to hedge against unwanted actions by the Trump administration.



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Analysis

Over the past twenty years the relationship between the United States and New Zealand has been transformed. Early in the post-ANZUS era the bilateral relationship was not warm, but over time it has matured into a strong and trusted one. While not formal security partners the US and NZ share many values and interests in their foreign relations, as demonstrated by the Wellington and Washington Declarations, participation in the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), and broad commitment to international law and institutions. The steady warming of relations has been profoundly impacted by the 2016 US election.

The election of GOP candidate Donald Trump represents a significant challenge for the government of New Zealand. The Trump administration has taken positions and actions at odds with the New Zealand government, notably withdrawal from the TPP, downplaying the importance of free trade, downgrading the importance of international cooperation in addressing climate change, signaling a significant reduction in funds for the United Nations, calling for a reduction in expenditure on bilateral aid for poverty alleviation, and an ambiguous view on nuclear nonproliferation to name a few.

The challenge may be felt in a variety of ways but perhaps none more so than in diplomatic representation in Washington, DC. Over the course the past fifteen years New Zealand has engaged with the US government, both executive and legislative branches, on matters of trade. In the course of pursuing trade issues New Zealand diplomats have developed numerous strong relationships with members of Congress. Maintaining and building new Congressional relationships is vitally important for New Zealand both as a hedge against unwanted actions by the US administration and for the broader goals of engagement with the US.

In mid-2015 MFAT undertook a review of Congressional outreach at the New Zealand Embassy. Following that review and after the US withdrawal from the TPP the Embassy restructured the way it engaged in Congressional outreach. The responsibility for Congressional outreach was given to a junior diplomat (replacing the locally engaged staff member) along with other duties. In addition, other diplomatic staff were tasked with building relationships in Congress. From a budgetary perspective this approach seems entirely rational, yet from a point of view of organisational strategy and political, it may require modification. Congressional outreach is labour intensive and time consuming. To be effective it must be well coordinated.

Why does this matter?

Numerous stresses test the global order: examples include conflict in the Middle East, terrorism, asymmetric conflict in Ukraine, the continued growth of the DPRK's nuclear capacity and international migration and refugee flows. Competition between the US and the PRC has become increasingly sharp as demonstrated by the establishment of Chinese bases in the South China Sea, increasing presence of US military assets in the region, and shifting allegiances among Southeast Asian nations. Given the importance to NZ of trade with China and the shared values and interests between the US and NZ increased competition or even the emergence of conflict in the region poses risks. As a small power NZ has limited capacity to make its diplomatic voice heard in Washington. Should NZ wish to influence US actions in East Asia it must find the appropriate tools. One avenue through which NZ can find voice for its point of view can be found through Congress. This lesson was made clear early in the Trump administration when the phone call between President Trump and Australia's



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Prime Minister Turnbull went awry. Coming to Australia's defence with the new administration were some 40 members of Congress who knew Australia well.

A growing concern for managing relationships in Washington emerges from the increasingly complex political environment. Diplomatic missions must maneuver carefully and avoid being caught up in the political fracas.

Congressional relationships capable of being leveraged take time to mature. They cannot be created quickly, but must be cultivated. Drawing on the experience of lobbyists, the most important tool for developing those relationships is information. The information needed by members of Congress is highly contextual. The most effective way of knowing what information to provide is by establishing ongoing relationships.

What should concerned governments and other relevant actors do?

- Reform diplomatic Congressional outreach of the NZ mission to Washington
- Expand MFAT budget to strengthen diplomatic engagement with the US
- Appoint a mid-career diplomat to head Congressional outreach and secure one locally engaged staff member with experience of the US Congress to support this role

Conclusion

The US decision to withdraw from the TPP along with other actions being undertaken by the Trump administration challenge New Zealand diplomacy. Building on the strengths of the relationships formed with members of the US legislative branch over the course of the past fifteen years can hedge against unwanted actions by the executive. To take advantage of this opportunity the correct diplomatic strategy and staff must be in place. The current approach to representing New Zealand in the US Congress may require recalibration to achieve the best outcomes.



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