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The Trump presidency and Australia's security: don't panic, don't relax

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Key points

- > Future US international policy has become uncertain, with the unpredictability of President Trump and deep divisions in political and public opinion.
- > Security competitors will severely test US resolve and power, while allies will seek to hedge against US unpredictability and against Chinese or Russian power.
- > Australia's strategic policy response will need to be steady and interests-based, avoiding both complacency and panic.
- > Australia will remain well-regarded in Washington but will need to work hard to convert goodwill to influence with US decision makers and power brokers.

Policy recommendations

- > Australia should intensify efforts – beyond usual diplomatic and defence channels – to influence US political decisions on international issues that matter to us.
- > Australia should deepen and diversify its security and economic partnerships in the Indo-Pacific, building a strategic web to bind and complement US alliances.
- > Government and business needs directly to explain and champion the importance to Australia of our comprehensive ties to the United States, including in new priority domains like cyber security, as well as investment and defence.

International uncertainty

It is already becoming obvious that a Trump presidency will increase global uncertainty and the potential for instability. Trump has no track record in international or security policy. Although some of his key appointments are sound, such as James Mattis for Secretary of Defense, there is little sign of policy consistency across their initial public statements.

The ripples of confusion from the US election campaign are not simply about the outcome – President Trump and Republicans control

both houses. The campaign revealed dramatic shifts and divisions in public sentiment that will unsettle US foreign, security and economic policy for years.

In line with trends across the Western world, the election revealed that a large part of the US population rejects the established international trade and security system. The two surprise successes in the primaries, Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders, sold the message that the system is broken and radical change is needed – with trade agreements a prime target.

There are also risks of serious levels of US disengagement from the international system, as US politics largely focuses on internal problems over the next presidential term. The gap in priorities between the public and the policy elites will need to narrow greatly if the US is to sustain a broad international leadership role.ⁱ Political bridge-building and policy consensus will be extremely difficult in a ‘post-truth’ environment where facts – such as Russia’s 2016 electoral interference – are contested.

Most US attention to international issues will likely be driven by external pressures and crisis rather than vision. It will be marked by partisanship, polarisation and the President’s personalised interventions. Already the nominee for Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, has said he will not try to restrain Trump’s tweeting. Few international policy initiatives are likely to be sustained, predictable or bipartisan.

Overall, the consequence is likely to be long-term uncertainty about how America defines its international interests and what it can be expected to do about them. This confusion will contribute to global instability.

Ensuring Australian influence

This is difficult news for Australia. The alliance with the United States remains central to our national security. We have no realistic alternative. Our interests are extensive and our capabilities cannot protect them in full.

The alliance is broad and deep enough to survive a Trump presidency, so we need not panic. But nor can we relax. We will need to reframe our engagement with the United States in plain terms of national interests – theirs and ours.

Australia will have better connections than most with the new Administration, and we can assume our officials will know many of its appointees. But the fragmentation of US politics means we cannot rely solely on normal channels to translate goodwill into influence or influence into action. We need to keep increasing our traction within Congress, among business leaders, key US agencies and a wide array of opinion shapers. We need creative approaches on top of traditional diplomacy –

it is not a job for government alone.

Before the new Administration asks more of us, we need to be sure it understands the extensive role Australia already plays in the alliance system. We have deployed on multiple fronts against terrorism. We champion a rules-based order in Asia and globally. Our strategic geography, maritime forces and wide-area surveillance capabilities are uniquely important to stability in the Indo-Pacific. Intelligence cooperation works both ways. The alliance supports US interests, not just Australia’s.

Testing times

States that compete with America for strategic or economic influence, notably China and Russia, or those in outright opposition, such as North Korea, will test US resolve early. Uneven rhetoric from the Administration, such as Tillerson’s claim the US will somehow deny China access to parts of the South China Sea, are unlikely to change Beijing’s habits of assertiveness.

Such tests will set the tone for the next four years, yet it is unknown how Trump will handle them. His campaign rhetoric suggests he will be less willing for the US to risk international involvement. But he will not ‘make America great again’ if US power retreats around the globe. His background as a ‘deal maker’ may push him to bilateral trade-offs to head off crises, but this may mean a patchwork of deals rather than a strategy. And Trump-initiated surprises, like shaking up assumptions about the One-China policy, may do as much to unsettle allies as unnerve competitors.

America’s allies, in contrast, will place a premium on maintaining the existing alliance system and encouraging the US to remain active and stabilising. This will potentially require allies, including Australia, to be seen to do more ‘heavy lifting’ in the alliance to address Trump’s concern that countries are ‘free riding’ on US power. For instance, Australia could be expected to do more in providing facilities to support US military activities in Asia and globally.

The new strategic uncertainty creates an opportunity for Australian diplomacy, at a time when a white paper process offers a rare window to recast our foreign policy settings. Australia can work both with the United States and without it in taking a lead to open economic and strategic opportunities for growth and stability

across the region. Australia will keep building its engagement with China, but will proceed carefully, amid differences on strategic issues and concern about Chinese involvement in Australia's affairs. We will need to look more widely.

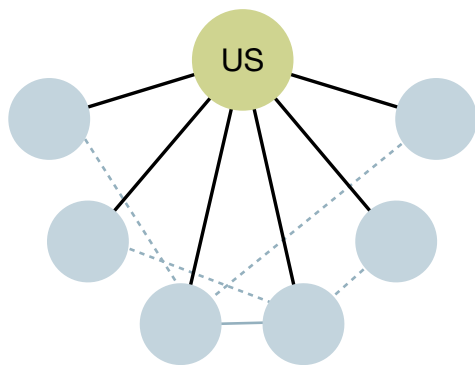
Diversifying strategic relationships

There is real fragility in our Indo-Pacific region. China and Russia are increasingly seeking to challenge both the existing balance of power and the normative order. The broader system of US-led security relationships in the region is not as resilient as our own US alliance.

As allies and partners adjust to the new risks and uncertainties, including the possibility the US role in Asia could still diminish, they will see opportunities to help one another. These countries need to hedge against US unpredictability as well as Chinese power. This provides Australia the chance to lead in upgrading and reshaping the network of relationships with such countries as Japan, India, Indonesia, South Korea, Singapore, the Philippines and Vietnam.

For decades, the system of security relationships in the region has been dominated by bilateral alliances between the US (the hub) and individual countries (the spokes). Such a system has been critically dependent on US power and action. This means it can be weakened even by temporary US disengagement. We can no longer afford that vulnerability.

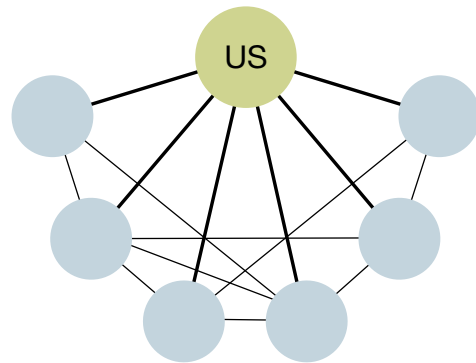
Traditional alliance system



In recent years, Australia has been quietly active in laying the groundwork for a more resilient system. Now we need to follow through. We should complete and reinforce a mutually supporting web where the United States

remains central, but the system is no longer constantly or critically dependent on US action. Practically, this means demonstrating that US allies and partners can work together at times without the United States.

A resilient web of allies and partners



This mutual self-help will make the system more resilient, deepen Australia's relationships with other regional countries, provide a hedge against possible US disengagement and help counter perceptions in the United States that other countries are 'free-riding' on US security commitments. It will also help give the lie to claims that everything US allies and partners do to protect their interests as Chinese power grows is some kind of US-led 'containment'.

Building this web will require all countries to contribute more to joint security priorities. It will need to go beyond rhetoric, to include frank and trusted dialogues on sensitive security issues: the Australia-Japan-India dialogue, set up in 2015, is a good start. Practical steps will depend on our existing relationships with different countries. They could range from joint exercises and training, capacity building in areas like maritime surveillance with countries like Indonesia and Vietnam, through to intelligence sharing, transfer of defence technology and open coordination of positions in regional forums such as the East Asia Summit with Japan, India, South Korea and Singapore.

Maintaining public support

While support for the US alliance among Australians has remained high for decades,ⁱⁱ it cannot be taken for granted. Trade and alliance networks are easy targets for populism, even though dismantling them leaves everyone poorer and less secure.

Deepening our network of security relationships will prove that our independent strategic policy is compatible with a strong US alliance. This will help counter the claims that Australia is over-reliant on America, does what Washington says, and does not engage enough with Asia. Such criticism has begun to intensify, given many Australians' clear concerns about Trump.ⁱⁱⁱ

Politicians, policy makers and opinion leaders need to do more to tell the public precisely why and how the US-backed alliance system is in our interests. This will require engaging directly with the arguments of those who criticise the alliance and who understandably worry about Trump. Often, what seems obvious to policy makers is surprising to the public, partly as a result of different access to information.

The Australian Defence Force is largely self-reliant in many contingencies, and the 2016 Defence White Paper commits to increased strategic weight. Australia needs to keep investing more in its own capabilities. But the government can also afford to be open about how much our defence still depends on the alliance, for technology, intelligence and ultimately the deterrent of American firepower.

Another good case for frankness about the alliance is in cyber security. Our defence and intelligence links with the United States give us far greater cyber intelligence and capability than we could otherwise possess. This

matters to everyone, including business and the public. Awareness of cyber vulnerabilities is growing in Australia, partly from the government's proactive approach to explaining the danger. It is a natural next step to highlight the importance of the US alliance to our cyber security.

Encouraging greater political advocacy of the alliance at a time when Trump is creating such unease may seem anomalous. Similarly, a focus on cyber when the US political system has shown itself vulnerable in this domain may seem odd. However, we can expect American security and intelligence agencies to be at the forefront of a new international push for cyber resilience.

More broadly, the unpredictable years ahead will be precisely the time to remind ourselves that the US alliance is larger, deeper and more enduring than any one Administration.

Endnotes

ⁱ The US National Intelligence Council acknowledges similar concerns. See *Global Trends: Paradox of Progress*, 2017, p. 139.

ⁱⁱ *Guarding Against Uncertainty: Australian Attitudes to Defence 2015*, Department of Defence, p. 112.

ⁱⁱⁱ The 2016 Lowy Institute poll indicated that 45 per cent of Australians considered that 'Australia should distance itself from the United States if it elects a president like Donald Trump'.

About this publication

This series of National Security College Policy Options Papers offers short, evidence-based and forward-looking insights for policy makers on topical security, foreign affairs and geostrategic issues facing Australia domestically, in the Indo-Pacific region and globally. We seek contributions from and collaborations with qualified researchers and experts in these fields.

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