

Afraid new world



The election of President Donald Trump brings the region and the world great uncertainty, writes Greg Raymond.

The election of President Trump brings more uncertainty than direction. His election campaign was in broad strokes, and his radical propositions may yet prove to be merely opening gambits for negotiations. Where foreign policy was concerned, the Middle East [received far more attention](#) than Asia.

When he did mention Asia, it was to threaten [tariffs on Chinese imports](#), and [less military support to Japan and South Korea](#). [Southeast Asia](#) was not mentioned. Therefore whatever we can say about the implications for a Trump presidency for the Asia Pacific must be based more on considering his foreign policy leanings and political position as a whole, rather than specific policy pronouncements.

On this front, we are still left with immense contradictions. For example, how does any government cut taxes, reduce debt and increase military spending, all of which Trump has pledged to do? That said, the overall impression is of a future where far more than for many decades, the Asia Pacific region will be left to solve its own problems. This will be a bracing prospect for all countries, frightening for some.

The Trump administration enters the Whitehouse with [a big domestic agenda](#). The economic challenges that Trump has elected to pursue including [tax reform](#), revitalising United States [manufacturing](#) and [dismantling Obamacare](#), will require energy and effort. The fact the Republican Party will control [both houses of Congress](#) will enable the new President to fully apply himself to this program. Unlike Obama, Trump will not be forced onto the international arena because of Congressional gridlock.

Moreover, [Trump's mandate](#) is much more about restoring the centrality of white middle America, through wage growth, employment and immigration policy, than it is about American global leadership. It seems then that foreign policy will be much more a second tier priority than in previous administrations.

This means whoever Trump nominates as Secretary of Treasury, Secretary of State and Defense Secretary may be of greater than usual importance. It may be these individuals who carry the lion's share of devising workable plans to implement Trump's utterances on two items of tremendous global importance: trade and alliances. Both of these have been central to the global leadership the United States has exercised since the end of World War II.

Trump believes the US has been 'dudged' in international trade and [he can do better](#). If he can't he may unilaterally impose tariffs, [including on goods from China](#). A businessman rather than an economist, Trump appears to place little store in promoting free trade and globalised commerce for their own sake. These goals were enshrined in US policy through the Bretton Woods institutions after the disasters of the mid-20th century, when protectionism brought the Great Depression, the impoverishing of Germany and the rise of Adolf Hitler. How would this affect China? Other economies in the Asia? The global economy? We just don't know. What we do know is that [the world economy continues to be fragile](#), and that China remains the bedrock of global growth, despite its gradual slowing. Will Trump be interested in second- and third- order impacts of US economic policies, or will screwing the other guy be his overriding aim? Again, we don't know but the possibilities of him getting this badly wrong are sobering for countries in the Asia Pacific.

On alliances, Trump [wants allies to do more for themselves](#). If that means [nuclear proliferation](#) among those most nervous about changing power balances like Japan, then so be it. Here we can perhaps concede that there is an incongruity in the United States maintaining 750 military bases overseas, while some US counties can't pay for bitumen on their roads. Grumpiness with free-loading allies is nothing new.

The US was weary of war after the Vietnam conflict, just as it is now weary after its Iraq and Afghanistan interventions. After Vietnam, this prompted the Nixon Doctrine, in which US partners would be expected to defend themselves in all circumstances short of an attack by a major power. But Trump's objections seem deeper. He appears uninterested in the notion that the credibility of US alliance commitments is what provides the strategic stability upon which economic growth can occur.

This orthodoxy grew out of the experience of Hitler and Chamberlain's appeasement at Munich, and remains strong amongst Washington's foreign policy elites. But it seems to have gradually waned in mainstream American politics. Obama, it is true, refused to carry through with his [threat to impose a heavy price on Syria](#) if it used chemical weapons. Obama also was much more [restrained](#) in responding to China's island-building program than many in the foreign policy establishment wanted. However, Obama did inaugurate the Pivot policy, which sought to provide strategic reassurance to states rattled by China's spectacular growth in economic and military capability.

The future of the Pivot is now anyone's guess. The demise of its primary non-military strand, the Trans Pacific Partnership, is assured. But if this policy is discontinued, the damage done, may not be severe. Firstly, among Asian countries there was always considerable skepticism of idea of a rebalance to Asia in Asia, and for several reasons. The US had strong forces in the theatre already, what difference would a Rebalance make? At the same time the US economy could no longer offer the kind of opportunities that it once did.

Equally, it seemed far from assured that the US would necessarily choose to go to war with another major power over rocks in the South China Sea, East China Sea or even Taiwan. Moreover, the region was accustomed to the US' wavering focus on Asia, with the leadership sporadically attending summits only for its attention to be drawn back to Europe or the Middle East.

Secondly, there is a respectable argument that Asian countries, with the exception of North Korea, have themselves contributed significantly to the long absence of any significant interstate conflict enjoyed by the region since the third Indochina war in 1979. Despite some serious rub points, most prominently displayed in the South China Sea, the states in the Asia Pacific have by and large adhered to a norm of dispute resolution through peaceful means. Of course, there is no guarantee that this will continue, particularly if China started to believe it could achieve a quick sharp military victory with minimal repercussions.

Will Trump's administration maintain the defence posture necessary to deter raw aggression? It seems more likely than not, as the US retains significant economic interests in Asia Pacific and would not see exclusion in its interest. Trump has also [committed](#) to rebuilding a 350 ship navy. It's unlikely these will be moored off the coast of continental United States – their use for power projection is a better bet.

Perhaps more concerning than the shelving of any specific policy, is what Trump may presage in terms of the tone of international relations. His unabashed admiration for Putin seems to signify a leader disconnected from the idealism that has animated US foreign policy from the time of Wilson. This could well ease tensions with [the illiberal regimes in our region](#), as he appears unlikely to pursue a human rights agenda.

Trump's vision for the US in the world appears to be one of selfish unilateralism. He looks prepared to weaken structures of collective security, such as NATO and collective problem solving, if they don't deliver immediate returns. His negative attitude to the [Iran treaty](#), negotiated with staggering effort with the remainder of the Security Council states plus Germany, is another example. If junking treaties negotiated by predecessors is pursued reflexively, without regard for the damage done to trust and relationships, we are looking at a period of significant turbulence and potential disorder.

Then there's the [absolute threat](#) he poses to seriously tackling climate change at the global level, with the Paris climate deal already appearing [in mortal danger](#) having only just got off the ground.

Much of Trump's long term impact internationally will depend on whether he can achieve enough of what he has promised at home, in his first-four year term, in order to have a decent shot at re-election. Most agree that given the [lack of policy detail](#) apparent from the outset, he may be a severe disappointment for those Americans expecting both prosperity and jobs. A failed re-election campaign will then limit his capacity to permanently change the US' role in the world.

And with that, if it can survive 'four more years', the world just may heave a sigh of relief.

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