



True North in
Canadian public policy

GLOBAL SECURITY LOOK AHEAD

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The Trump Presidency: Bringing “Interesting Times” to Global Affairs

Stephen M. Saideman

Donald Trump’s victory has much of the world nervous, and rightfully so. Outsiders – and Americans, too – are trying to assess which campaign promises President Trump will keep and which ones he will drop. Indeed, we might speculate that the campaigning Trump and the governing Trump are two different people: after all, politicians renege on their campaign promises all the time, don’t they? In fact, that isn’t true. Most politicians prefer to, and do tend to, keep their promises. Still, Trump is no ordinary politician, and he has frequently taken all sides of many issues, so it is hard to discern what he is likely to do.

Which gets to the heart of the matter: *Donald Trump generates uncertainty*. Because of his disregard for the norms of American politics, because of his habit of switching positions, and because he is not tied to any constituency, Trump raises doubts about American guarantees and commitments. Because the United States is the indispensable, fundamental supporter of the existing international order, Trump’s election raises critical challenges not just for Canadian-American bilateral relations, but for global peace and prosperity. The stakes are simply that high.

Throughout the recent US Presidential campaign, Donald Trump took many stances that challenge and undermine the building blocks of the post-1945 and post-Cold War international order. For instance, Trump has taken the NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) burden-sharing debate to a new level

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by suggesting that allied countries that pay less than they have committed to pay [might not receive American assistance](#) if they are attacked. The United States provides most of the alliance's military capability, which is linked to the US nuclear deterrent. In the past, the US has been more willing than most of the allies to commit to defending the Baltic countries. Those countries face the Russian threat most directly, but Trump's attitude towards NATO raises questions about whether the alliance will aid the Baltics in a crisis. Those facts combined with reports that [former campaign manager Paul Manafort](#), the future national security advisor [Michael Flynn](#), and the secretary of state nominee [Rex Tillerson](#) have ties to Putin and Russia, lead to direct concerns about the future of NATO. This should worry Canadians along with everyone else.

Similarly, Donald Trump has consistently expressed a desire to protect the American market from international competition. But the US market has been a key factor in international economic stability since the Second World War precisely because of its openness. In each major economic crisis, countries could be reassured that their firms would have access to the American market. With a threat to raise tariffs significantly on Chinese goods and a promise to renegotiate the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the US will no longer be the market of last resort. This, too, should worry Canadians. The lessons of the Great Depression will be unlearned, leaving the world without its most important defender of global trade. Trump has even [threatened to default](#) on the debt the US owes China. While this might just be loose talk, fear of any action like that could cause a financial panic.

Will Trump follow through on his musings? We do not know, which is not reassuring as uncertainty itself is very problematic. Throughout history, uncertainty about allies has been a frequent cause for war. As leaders of countries calculate the likely costs of a war, they have often misperceived the responses of the allies of their targets.

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In the run-up to the First World War, for instance, the Germans hoped and expected that the British would not keep their commitment to the French. Had the Germans been more certain of the forces arrayed against them, they might have been far less eager for war. In 1950, the US tried to make its alliance commitments clear around the world, but omitted South Korea from its map of commitments. This may have encouraged North Korea to attack, dragging the United States into that war. The US then underestimated China's commitment, which led to the latter's intervention in the same war. In the summer of 1990, Iraqi President Saddam Hussein met with the American ambassador about border tensions between Iraq and Kuwait. Hussein left the meeting assured that the US did not have a position in the dispute. That was not meant as a green light for an Iraqi attack, but that is how Hussein saw it. Simply put, wars can start when there is uncertainty about alliance commitments. Uncertainty causes countries to anticipate, and leaves allies to hedge their bets by appeasing the likely aggressor or by investing in nuclear weapons.

How may this play out over the next four years? Already, Trump's phone call with the President of Taiwan – with conflicting stories of whether this was [planned](#) or [improvised](#) – has led to China flying a plane [armed with nuclear weapons](#) over the contested South China Sea. Trump's contradictory statements about NATO will almost certainly lead to a test by Russia's Vladimir Putin. These kinds of events can lead to one of two outcomes: countries may choose to fall under the influence of China or Russia to avoid being swallowed up, or we may find ourselves at war.

Likewise, uncertainty is bad for most financial markets. Businesses may hold off on investing until they have a better idea of what may happen, leading to a recession. In the current case, countries may opt to side with China, rather than the United States, if they feel the former is a greater source of economic stability. Already, the likely demise of the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) is giving China greater sway.

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Trump has promised to withdraw the US from the 12-nation trade deal on his first day in office. Indeed, even before he formally takes office, Donald Trump has caused markets to swing wildly after he made statements about Air Force One ([Boeing](#)) and the F-35 stealth fighter jet ([Lockheed Martin](#)).

Why is Trump an uncertainty engine? He sees himself as a deal maker, and as such, he frequently bluffs to get bargains. Such behaviour might be advantageous in real estate, but it has significant downsides in international relations. And, if there is one consistency in Trump's inconsistency, it is that he respects no norms or rules. A litany of controversies during the election campaign bear this out. With regard to global affairs, it was reported that during one of his first

contacts with foreign leaders following the election, a call with Argentine President Macri, he sought assistance for one of his building projects (Trump and Macri both deny this). His spokespeople say that [the rules on conflicts of interest do not apply to Trump](#), whose relationships and decisions in office could have significant repercussions for his sprawling business empire, though he could find himself running afoul of the "[Emoluments clause](#)" of the [US Constitution](#), which prevents the President receiving gifts from foreign governments.

When it comes to foreign policy, Trump has demonstrated little real knowledge. Instead, he relies on his advisors, which would not be unusual for a president, but Trump's choices of advisors themselves have generated considerable controversy. Trump's first appointment on foreign policy was Lieutenant-General (retired) Michael Flynn as national security advisor. Flynn also serves on the transition team, perhaps shaping quite significantly subsequent national security appointments. But Flynn has had his judgment questioned over his connections with foreign governments. He spoke at an event hosted by [Russia Today](#), a Russian propaganda outlet. And he has been criticized because [his firm had lobbied for a company whose founder has connections to the Turkish government at the same time he was receiving intelligence briefings as Trump's foreign policy expert](#). Flynn is also considered by those who have worked with him to be [temperamental](#), and has courted controversy with his views on social media, particularly [with regard to Muslims](#).

The job of the national security advisor is to present the President with options and then make sure decisions are implemented as intended. Having a national security ‘hot-head’ advising Trump, who is himself easily provoked, could prove disastrous. Much can go awry when the national security advisor lacks good judgment, as Ronald Reagan and Congress realized when John Poindexter oversaw the selling of arms to Iran to fund American-supported rebels in Nicaragua in the mid-1980s.

Trump has shown he can be easily influenced by his advisors. This can be positive. For example, after meeting with General James Mattis (retired), later selected as secretary of defense, Trump [reversed himself on the question of torture](#). But while some might be assured that Trump is no longer so enamored with torture, the way he has changed his mind suggests that whoever is last to speak with Trump will be most influential. Already, we see his staff trying to manipulate him. During the campaign, for example, Paul Manafort, Trump’s erstwhile campaign manager, reportedly [lied to Trump about the campaign plane](#) needing an extra day of maintenance in Indiana so that Trump, forced to spend more time with Mike Pence, would ultimately choose Pence as his running mate. More recently, [Reince Priebus, the incoming White House chief of staff, was reported to have lied to Trump](#) about a *New York Times* appointment with the then President-elect because he was afraid that Trump would underperform in a real interview.

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Lastly, one of Trump’s positive qualities can also contribute to uncertainty about his intentions: He has no ties to any constituencies. Trump did not come to power by appealing to specific interest groups within the Republican Party, which made him more attractive to the anti-system voters in the electorate. This means, however, that we do not know which groups will be more influential in the years ahead or which commitments will really tie him down. This again makes Trump unpredictable, reinforcing global uncertainty about the future of US foreign, defence, and economic policy.

What does this mean for Canada? A bumpy ride is the best that Canadians can hope for. If Trump destabilizes international markets, the Canadian dollar and the Toronto Stock Exchange will feel the effects “big league,” as Trump would say. Increased trade barriers will obviously be extremely costly for Canadian producers. While Trump has had nothing to say about NORAD, his NATO stances will have a direct effect on Canada’s key military engagements in the world. If Trump pulls American troops out of East Europe, the Canadian deployment to Latvia would face a higher risk of being tested by Putin and Russia, forcing Prime Minister Justin Trudeau into a very tough spot. The bad news is that there is little Trudeau can do, as Canada does not possess many levers over Trump. Unless Trudeau can write some persuasive tweets it is not clear how he could reach Trump, who is surrounding himself with advisors who have their own agendas, none of which seem to put Canada’s good standing anywhere near the top of their priorities.

What can Canadian leaders do to deal with Trump's uncertainty engine? They will have to avoid reacting to every swing, every statement. Perhaps it would be best to try to work at lower levels - where Canadian civil servants often meet with American bureaucrats. That is, Trump only appoints the top three or four layers of most agencies, so his people will not extend all the way into the Washington bureaucracy. Thus, perhaps the best bet is for Canada to work on the relationship and its many issues at the level of civil servants and not at the level of head of government. The good news is that Canada never got much negative attention from Trump. Perhaps just staying out of the way might be the way ahead.

Contemporary peace and prosperity have depended upon the certainty that the US would assist other nations in times of trouble. Countries did not have to anticipate and guess about that, which has meant that misperceptions and preemptive moves have not been a major part of international relations for decades. Alas, misunderstandings will now be of primary concern for the next four - and potentially eight - years. Given Trump's rocky start in relations with China, the latter's reputed ancient curse seems prescient: "May you live in interesting times." As an international relations scholar, I find it strange to be longing for a less interesting time in world politics.

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