

'Trumpism' and the Future of International Politics: The Return of Realism

Written by Phil Cole

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2017/01/29/trumpism-and-the-future-of-international-politics/>

PHIL COLE, JAN 29 2017

While international politics will undoubtedly change under Donald Trump's reign as American president, the question is whether this will simply be a shift in balance of priorities or a radical break with the past. My sub-title, 'the return of Realism', doesn't help here because many would argue that Realism never went away – to assume that Trump represents a radical break is to be excessively naïve about Barack Obama's record as president.

Certainly there is a danger in seeing Obama's rule as a golden age of enlightened politics. For example under his watch the use of drones to assassinate those the United States considered to be terrorists became a major policy. But I still believe that we should beware the opposite danger of being naïve about Trumpism. What we have here, I want to argue, is a radical break.

Of course under Obama and previous presidents we had a policy of America First. But the point is that there was a second, and a third, and a fourth, etc. What we saw was a balancing between prioritising the United States' self-interest – Realism – and building a framework of international rule of law which applied equally to all participants – liberal internationalism. The measure of progressivism for US presidents was the size of the gap between America First and whatever came second.

Trumpism is radically different because we now have a policy of America First and there is no second – nothing else matters. This is not a subtle or not-so-subtle re-balancing between America's self-interest and the interests all have in an international political order. The international political order is not a concern for Trumpism.

The refutation of Realism was always the fact that states, most importantly the United States, signed up to treaties and laws which were not in their self-interest, such as international humanitarian law and human rights treaties. The United States also funded international organisations that looked to the interests of others around the world rather than its own citizens. For example, it currently funds the UNHCR to the tune of nearly \$1,500,000,000, far ahead to the next biggest donor, the European Union with \$340,000,000. It has also been far the biggest facilitator of refugee re-settlement, taking over 50,000 refugees through the UNHCR's programme in 2015. The next biggest was Canada with 10,000.

Under Trumpism, that refutation of Realism will no longer be available. It looks as though the United States will radically review its financial commitments to international bodies like the United Nations and its refugee re-settlement programme is likely to be cut back severely. As for international treaties and agreements, Trumpism exposes these for what they always were – unenforceable. It looks increasingly likely that the United States will walk away from any treaty or agreement that it considers not to be in the interests of American citizens.

The consequences for international organisations like the UN will be disastrous, and, although Norway may be willing to step into the gap, we are looking at an age when international organisations wither away, and international cooperation on key global challenges withers away with them.

This is the return of Realism, with three superpowers pursuing strategic self-interest and trampling over and

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destroying the delicate new growth of international law and human rights treaties that has sprung up since 1945. Up until now, one of those superpowers, the United States, has had at least some respect and responsibility for that framework and made some attempts to protect it so that it could grow further. But now we will be watching a Godzilla movie, in which everything is trampled underfoot in the struggles between these three monsters.

For now, Trump has no issues with Russia, but only because Russia carries no threat to the United States in terms of manufacturing and jobs. The enemy is China, as the Realists always predicted. They also predicted war with China and while we may have thought that unimaginable, what we should have learned about Trumpism by now is to rule nothing out.

In relation to Russia that brings us to NATO. We know that the United States has long been angry with its European partners about their military commitment to NATO, and asked them why the US should pay so much for their defence when they pay so little. But remained highly unlikely that the US would walk away from NATO, certainly at a time when Russia is becoming more belligerent.

But under Trumpism Europe's security is its own problem. Why should American citizens pay for the military commitment to NATO? If Russia wants to bully Europe, that is Europe's problem. The United States is too busy bullying its own neighbours, like Mexico, to get involved.

And so Trumpism represents a radical break, not a shift in balance. None of the old rules apply, because under Trumpism rules are for losers. Realism has returned, and liberal internationalism is, for now anyway, dead.

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