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## AMERICA FIRST: THE GLOBAL TRUMP AT SIX MONTHS

Colin Robertson

### SUMMARY

For Donald Trump 'America First' means 'America First.' Canada and like-minded nations will have to get used to it.

Canada will have to actively engage with Congress, the states and the private and public interests that drive the American agenda. We will also have to put more effort and contribute more to the rules-based order of which we have been a beneficiary.

Traditional statecraft is based on predictability and stability, both hallmarks of U.S. post-war foreign policy practised by both Democrats and Republicans. Predictable, Mr. Trump is not. The deliberation and careful planning that characterized the Obama administration have been replaced by Mr. Trump's reliance on gut and instinct. Such unpredictability will continue to create heartburn inside foreign chancelleries, whether friend or foe.

Where once the USA was prepared to cover the spread on trade and security, under Donald Trump there will be more take than give. Now, Canada and the allies will have to make their own investments in hard power to preserve collective security. But less dependence and reliance on US leadership and more collective responsibility would be a good thing.

Middle powers, like Canada, will have to step up their diplomacy, both collective and individual. Focusing on their own niche capacities they will have to shore up the space left by Trump Administration decisions on climate, migration and at the international institutions that sustain the rules-based order. Ironically, one effect of the Trump presidency may be to make the western alliance stronger.

## PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: A 'SPECTACLE OF EXCESS'

In action and words, President Donald Trump, like Candidate Donald Trump, continues to demonstrate a "[spectacle of excess](#)."

Blunt and abrasive, bombastic and brash, Donald Trump is an insurgent. He campaigned as the champion of America's "[forgotten men and women](#)" and his "America First" policy draws unabashedly on nativism, populism and protectionism.

Since taking office, President Trump has acted on many of his specific pledges, drawing frequently on his executive powers.

Executive orders suspended immigration from seven Muslim countries (although were promptly overturned by judges). Executive orders approved construction of both the Dakota Access pipeline and the [Keystone XL pipeline](#). Executive orders rolled back president Obama's Clean Power Plan, replacing it with President Trump's [Energy Independence Policy](#).

Another set of orders withdrew the U.S. from the [Trans-Pacific Partnership \(TPP\)](#), ordered the renegotiation of [the North American Free Trade Agreement \(NAFTA\)](#), and opened a 90-day investigation in America's [trade deficits](#) with 16 countries (including Canada).

Trump's first [budget](#) proposals increased spending for defence and homeland security, while cutting funding for the environment, diplomacy and most other agencies.

Neither the discipline of power, nor convention, nor political correctness matters to Donald Trump.

The Trump cabinet is [whiter](#), wealthier, older and more male than those of George W. Bush or Barack Obama. It has an unusually high representation of "[billionaires and generals](#)."

The presidency has done nothing to temper Donald Trump's bombast or brash behaviour. The mainstream media and its "fake news" gets the back of his hand. While Mr. Trump's supporters may give him a pass in the short-term eventually the lies and theatrics will wear thin. As [Elaine Kamarck](#), a fellow at the Brookings Institution, observes:

"President Trump has consistently behaved in ways that undermine his own self-interest. Take the Russia issue. It is entirely possible that he is completely innocent. But almost everything he has said or done since the election undermines that possibility, and reminds one of that old saying: where there's smoke there's fire. Moreover, he has consistently said things that are not true — like that [Obama had him wiretapped](#) or that his Electoral College victory was the [biggest since Ronald Reagan](#). Following these tweets or statements, he inexplicably has stood by them in the face of no evidence. He repeatedly seems to go out of his way to make enemies, not friends, by attacking the press and reporters personally. There have also been times when his words in front of a group have been completely inappropriate."

Donald Trump's diplomatic approach is unlike any other US president, confounding America's traditional friends and allies.

Autocrats appear to get a pass if not an embrace. After Turkey's referendum, Mr. Trump congratulated President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the only western leader to do so. He lavished praise on General Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi, Egypt's military leader. He backed Marine LePen and the far right in the French elections. His first official visit took him to Saudi Arabia where he lauded its theocratic rulers and those of the Gulf nations. He treated Chinese President Xi Jing-ping at Mar-a-Lago and gave Russian President Vladimir Putin more time than any other leader at the G-20.

Allies have not had the same treatment. When the conversation turned sour, he reportedly "[hung up](#)" on Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull. Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto canceled a Washington visit after Mr. Trump tweeted that "If Mexico is [unwilling to pay for the badly needed wall](#), then it would be better to cancel the upcoming meeting." He refused to shake hands with Angela Merkel, the democratically elected leader of Germany whom The Economist magazine once described as the "[Indispensable European](#)". He tweeted abuse at the mayor of London after that city's terrorist attacks. Arriving at the NATO summit in Brussels he lambasted the allies for not paying their dues.

The Trump approach comes with a cost. After the G7 and NATO meetings, Conservative pundit David Frum tweeted: "Since 1945, the [supreme strategic goal](#) in Europe of the USSR and then Russia was the severing of the U.S.-German alliance. Trump delivered."

Then there are the lies.

After a hundred days in office the *Washington Post* catalogued [492 false or misleading claims](#), following on the [59 Four-Pinocchio ratings](#) Donald Trump earned as a presidential candidate. The New York Times is still keeping a list believing that "as regular as they have become, the country should [not allow itself to become numb to them](#)." By design or accident, his tweets, whoppers and pronouncements keep him at the forefront of the media cycle.

To the consternation of his critics, it delights his supporters whose support remains [strong](#). But at some point, the public is likely to become fatigued and long for a return to stable government.

## **A TRUMP DOCTRINE?**

Promising to "make America great again," Donald Trump told GOP delegates at his Cleveland nomination convention that "[Americanism](#), not globalism, will be our credo" because only then will Americans "get the [respect](#) that we deserve." He promised to rebuild America's defence establishment saying: "we don't want to have a depleted military because we're all over the place fighting in areas that we shouldn't be fighting in. It's not going to be depleted any longer."

Throughout the campaign and then in his "thank-you" stops after his election, Mr. Trump was emphatic about keeping American forces out of foreign wars, saying that "we will stop

[racing to topple foreign regimes](#) that we know nothing about, that we shouldn't be involved with." Instead he said, "our focus must be on defeating terrorism and destroying ISIS, and we will."

Now, President Trump faces hard decisions around increasing the military commitment in Afghanistan and continuing to sustain the effort in Iraq and Syria.

Since his Inaugural Address, his speech to the [people of Poland](#) has provided the most insight into President Trump's global perspective. In asking a series of questions in Warsaw's Krasinski Square (July 6, 2017), he returned to the dark "[carnage in America](#)" theme of his Inaugural Address :

"The fundamental question of our time is whether the west has the will to survive. Do we have the confidence in our values to defend them at any cost? Do we have enough respect for our citizens to protect our borders? Do we have the desire and the courage to preserve our civilisation in the face of those who would subvert and destroy it?"

In their Wall Street Journal column '[America First Doesn't Mean America Alone](#)' (May 30, 2017), National Security Advisor H. R. McMaster and National Economic Council director Gary Cohn write that while the US is "asking a lot of our allies and partners... in return America will once again be a true friend to our partners and the worst foe to our enemies."

Defence Secretary Jim Mattis spoke (June 2, 2017) in a similar vein when he said at the Shangri-la Security Dialogue in Singapore: "we have a deep and abiding commitment to reinforcing the [rules-based international order](#)".

In speaking to State Department employees, Secretary Rex Tillerson observed that the 'America First' policy "doesn't mean it comes at the expense of others. Our [partnerships and our alliances](#) are critical to our success ... but we've got to bring them back into balance."

Unlike the often lengthy deliberation practised by the Obama Administration, the Trump Administration is not reluctant to act quickly.

The intervention in Syria was the Administration's first major military initiative. President Trump said he found the pictures of gassed children choking to death "[reprehensible](#)" and insisted they "cannot be ignored by the civilized world."

Secretary Tillerson and General McMaster argued that the Trump administration would be "[willing to act](#) when governments and actors cross the line" and that the "strike itself was proportional because it was targeted at the facility that delivered this most recent chemical weapons attack".

General McMaster observed that they had "[weighed the risk](#) associated with any military action, but we weighed that against the risk of inaction ... which is the risk of (these) continued, egregious, inhumane attacks on innocent civilians with chemical weapons."

The Obama administration was accused of dithering and over-deliberating before taking action. This is not likely to apply to the Trump administration. Rather it would do well to heed Talleyrand's advice to leaders: 'Surtout, pas trop de zele' (Above all, not too much zeal).

Bloomberg's Margaret Tevlev observed that the Trump approach at the G7 and NATO summit "was [calibrated](#) by the White House to show ... to a domestic audience, as well as to Europe, that President Trump is not going to abandon every position that he held from the campaign just because he is here in these meetings, but, at the same time, there was a recognition from his aides that the more he engages with key allies all over the world, the more nuance is brought to the table in terms of him understanding the leadership role that the U.S. is expected to fulfill and the complexities of those obligations."

Looking at the Trump administration after five months, Elliott Abrams, a fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations — whose appointment as deputy secretary at the State Department was nixed by Trump senior adviser Steve Bannon — observed: "this is [not a revolutionary administration](#). The broad lines of its policy fit easily within those of the last few decades. Trump might not be a conventional president, but so far, his foreign policy has been remarkably unremarkable." Perhaps.

## CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

President Donald Trump is unconventional and unpredictable. On the road, his blend of bravado, bullying, and bluster fits easily into the stereotypical characterization of the "ugly American."

But as Prime Minister Trudeau, who has managed his relationship as well as any foreign leaders, observes: "I have always found that whenever he has made an engagement to me or a commitment to me on the phone or in person, [he followed through](#) on that, and that is someone you can work with,"

To understand Donald Trump, one needs to read his 1987 book Trump: [The Art of the Deal](#), which chronicles his various business deals in his successful effort to build a real estate empire. It underlines his preference for bilateral negotiations (third parties, he writes, are unnecessary complications, which result in leaving money on the table). Think big and, as Mr. Trump writes, "The worst thing you can possibly do in a deal is seem desperate to make it. That makes the other guy smell blood, and then you're dead." Those negotiating with the Trump Administration, including Canadian and Mexicans who will soon begin re-negotiation of the NAFTA, should keep this in mind.

There is a tendency among new administrations, especially with a change in party, to vilify and repudiate the policies of their predecessors. This danger is magnified in the Trump administration. Assuming malfeasance and error, on the part of their predecessor, leads to over-correction. The repudiation of the Paris Climate Accord is a case of throwing out the baby with the bath water.

Nuance is not President Trump's thing. In language, tone and application, Donald Trump's international policy pronouncements on big issues like climate, migration, trade and on the utility of multilateralism are an abrupt departure from post-war American policy. But it is not by its rhetoric that the Trump administration should be judged, but rather its actions.

Here the record is less dogmatic and there is more evidence of continuity than of change in foreign policy: the intervention in Syria to preserve international norms on chemical warfare; confrontations with Russia over its lack of accountability; pragmatism towards China; and the re-embracing of the value of NATO and of collective defence, a 180-degree shift from Mr. Trump's campaign rhetoric, albeit with an emphasis on allies pulling their weight in terms of sharing the burden.

There is more reliance on muscle, almost theatrically so.

There was the highly publicized dropping in April 2017 of the "[mother of all bombs](#)" in Afghanistan, and the May 2017 launching of missiles against Bashar al-Assad's Syrian air base as "[after-dinner entertainment](#)" while Mr. Trump was hosting Chinese President Xi Jinping at Mar-a-Lago. President Trump has told North Korea it has "[gotta behave](#)." Vice President Mike Pence and cabinet secretaries James Mattis and Rex Tillerson have all echoed the warning to North Korea that "all options are on the table," pointing to the "[strength and resolve](#) of our new president in actions taken in Syria and Afghanistan."

All new administrations have their pratfalls, but during the first six months of the Trump administration, rarely a day goes by without some controversy and they are not helped by Mr. Trump's tweets.

If Mr. Trump's administration is unpredictable, it is not entirely capricious.

On the details of an issue, even hot-button items like [waterboarding](#), for example, or providing explanations on a crisis like the Syrian intervention, President Trump says he will defer to his cabinet officers (although, he will also sometimes go his own way, as he demonstrated with his [refusal](#) to explicitly underline U.S. support for NATO's Article 5 at the Brussels summit). He is much more a CEO than a micro-manager.

As the Trump administration approaches six months in office there has been consistency with campaign promises around the decisions to withdraw from the TPP, to freeze the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership negotiations, to renegotiate NAFTA, and to pull out of the Paris climate accord.

There is clearer definition on its policies: trade - protectionist; energy - drill and burn fossil fuels; climate - repudiation; defence - more money; and the rest of government - less money. To secure U.S. energy independence, the energy team is carrying through on the campaign promise of "drill, baby, drill" and repeal of Obama era environmental regulation.

There have been shifts: on NATO (now for it) and China (now more friend than enemy since the Xi-Trump Mar-a-Lago summit) while the warm words during the campaign for Vladimir Putin have been tempered by events. Where once the US led across the board, there are now deep divisions with its closest allies on climate, on trade, on migration, on the utility of multilateralism.

There is still much to be determined: an approach to Africa or Latin America and the rest of Asia (beyond China and North Korea); involvement in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria; an Iran policy; and functional policies, for example, on cybersecurity and human rights.

The trade team, led by Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross, United States Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer and White House Trade Director Peter Navarro, is mercantilist and anti-China. They want to do more enforcement on the trade scofflaws and, at the same time, re-negotiate the various trade pacts, beginning with NAFTA. Their challenge will be their capacity to cope with all the hares they have set running, including acting on the executive orders on trade deficits, steel and aluminum and Hire American and Buy American.

Too much decision-making appears to be done on the run. The White House media briefings are chaotic and vitriolic. There is no appearance of order and deliberation.

All new administrations endure initial jostling for position by the main players for place and standing. In this Administration, the appearance is that the elbows are sharper and the divisions increasingly personal. Until the full team is in place, figuring out who is up and who is down, and where and how decisions are made is difficult.

While the cabinet is in place, most of the supporting cast of deputies, assistants and deputy assistant secretaries are still to be named let alone confirmed. As of July 4, according to the nonpartisan [Partnership for Public Service](#), nominees for just 46 out of 561 key jobs in the Trump administration had been confirmed by the Senate, and there are still no nominees for 384 positions.

The liberal-based international order has always relied on its guardian, the United States to be the adult in the room. U.S. allies are beginning to say publicly what they say to themselves in private: that a Trump-led America is not a reliable ally.

Canadian Foreign Minister Chrystia Freeland recently observed in outlining the contours of her government's foreign policy that while the U.S. has "truly been the [indispensable nation](#)," it may be tiring of "global leadership." Canada and like-minded, middle-power nations will have to step up in defence of the rules-based liberal international system.

Keeping balance and preserving stability during Trump times will be a test for diplomacy and diplomatic services the world over.

## **About the Author**

A former Canadian diplomat, Colin Robertson is a Senior Advisor to Dentons LLP living in Ottawa, Canada. He is Vice President and Fellow at the Canadian Global Affairs Institute and hosts its regular Global Exchange podcast. He is an Executive Fellow at the University of Calgary's School of Public Policy and a Distinguished Senior Fellow at the Norman Paterson School of International Affairs at Carleton University. Robertson sits on the advisory councils of the Johnson-Shoyama School of Public Policy, Conference of Defence Associations Institute, North American Research Partnership and the Sir Winston Churchill Society of Ottawa. He is an Honorary Captain (Royal Canadian Navy) assigned to the Strategic Communications Directorate. He is a member of the Deputy Minister of International Trade's NAFTA Advisory Council. He writes a regular column on foreign affairs for the Globe and Mail and he is a frequent contributor to other media.



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### The School of Public Policy

University of Calgary, Downtown Campus  
906 8th Avenue S.W., 5th Floor  
Calgary, Alberta T2P 1H9  
Phone: 403 210 3802

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