

Trump now requires Australia to have a foreign policy

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In one phone call, President-elect Donald Trump radically redefined the US' relationship with Australia's most important trading partner. **AP**

by **Geoff Raby**

The unthinkable has now occurred. The political leaders of the United States and Taiwan have spoken to each other. The first direct contact in nearly 40 years. The world hasn't quite been turned upside down, but it won't be the same again, especially for Australia.

Trump's taking Tsai's call was no casual event. If Malcolm Turnbull didn't have Trump's number in his mobile phone, then Tsai most certainly didn't. This was a planned and calculated decision by the Trump team – whoever they are – to massively recalibrate relations with China.

China was more relaxed about the surprise Trump victory than it would have been with Clinton's. For Beijing he is a deal maker, a pragmatist, albeit someone who plays fast and loose. But he evinced no interest in the liberal internationalist agenda which so irritates Beijing with its emphasis on human rights and the environment, and which places relatively little weight on China's substantial material achievements that have improved so many lives beyond anyone's expectations.

Beijing is now thinking: "Be careful for what you wish for." In a single action Trump has redefined the US-China relationship. China has now been put on the defensive in the management of the relationship for the first time in many years. The intended or unintended consequence of this move is that Trump, the deal maker, has brought into play another and most valuable bargaining chip with which to play the relationship with China.

China has been blindsided because it has become complacent in its management of the relationship, keeping the US on the defensive and in strategic retreat at the same time. The Chinese leadership, diplomats and its army of advisers and think tanks all missed this "black swan moment".

Just as China's leaders must have been congratulating themselves on the recent visit of two key ASEAN leaders, from the Philippines and Malaysia, which snubbed the US stance over the South China Sea and left Australia like the proverbial "shag on a rock" with its strident running public commentary on the issue, Trump has spoiled the party.

This has nothing to do with Taiwan, nor the US' support for a democratic system that it played such a vital role in creating. This is all about a return to great power politics. Trump and his advisers understand US power, its preponderance over China and its will to use it if required. What greater gauntlet could the President-elect throw down

to China to challenge its growing assertiveness, than Taiwan? The calculus behind this is chilling; or it is sheer recklessness.

Apart from putting China in its place, it may be part of a more sophisticated strategy to pressure it into playing a more co-operative role on issues of global concern such as North Korean nuclear weapons capacity, Iran and the Middle East, and to ease pressure in the South China Sea. It could also be intended to remind China that Putin is not necessarily the ally of choice.

For Australia, the implications are breathtaking. For the past two decades we have placed preponderant weight on the US security alliance. We have marched lock-step with it into wars and conflicts which today, on reflection, few can sensibly argue were in our own national interest, or indeed of the US for that matter.

We have sacrificed blood and treasure to be at the US' shoulder in the hope that our own security would ultimately be guaranteed by these past commitments. Of course, in the usual lackadaisical way such matters of great importance for the country are discussed, little effort is put into defining and identifying who the threat is, and under what circumstances we might be threatened, before we pay our hefty insurance premiums.

Now we have to make a real decision about how we manage our foreign and security policies. Are we still going to be locked at the hip with the US, when the President-elect has overnight radically redefined its relationship with our most important trading partner? This is no small matter for the Prime Minister to consider.

Hugh White's much acclaimed book, *The China Choice*, has been widely misunderstood in Australia as being about the choice Australia might have to make between its guarantor of security and its economic future. White's choice is not about Australia, but about how the US chooses to deal with China's rise – accommodate it or seek to contain it with the inevitability of conflict. Sensibly, White advocates accommodation, which some have irresponsibly tried to tag with the most reprehensible phrase in the modern security lexicon, "appeasement". Of course, how the US chooses to deal with China has huge implications for Australia. Now the time has come. Australia can no longer take comfort in alliance relationships. Trump has made it clear that he is prepared to play a big game, for better or worse, and assert US power. The US-China relationship has enormous ballast and depth. Australia would wish to have a fraction of that. So there is great stability in the relationship that will most likely ensure conflict and major disruptions are avoided. But the stakes all round have been raised.

With Trump as President, and as this week's telephone call with the Taiwan leader amply demonstrates, Australia simply cannot throw its lot in with the incoming Trump administration. As former prime minister Paul Keating said recently, Australia will now have to get a foreign policy for itself.

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