



President Trump – One Year On

On the anniversary of Donald Trump's inauguration it was only fitting the US government remained closed as Congress could not agree on a funding bill. President Trump's approval ratings remain well below most of the presidents who came before him on their first anniversary. A recent [Gallup poll](#) put global approval of US leadership at just 30%, the lowest of any president on their first anniversary.

When Donald Trump first walked into White House in January 2017 as US president, unlike almost all of his predecessors he was not a politician. In fact, he had never held political office and as the presidential debates showed he possessed nothing in terms of policy aside from a few sound bites that were at best entertaining but almost impossible to implement. The US public were fed up with seasoned politicians saying one thing but looking after their own pockets and friends in the corporate world. Disillusioned by the democracy in the US the public was looking for an anti-establishment figure that would go against the grain. This election offered the worst of all possibilities and many voted for the lesser of two evils.

Trump's main foreign policy positions were to work with Russia; he believed he could do business with Putin. Trump spoke of the need to deal with China, who was manipulating its currency at the expense of US consumers. For Trump, dealing with China included re-looking at tariffs, intellectual property and bringing jobs back to American soil. NATO was obsolete and other multilateral institutes according to Trump were not working for the US as its allies were not picking up the tab. Trump presented himself as anti-establishment and someone who represented the true American populace who lost their jobs to China and who the political elite neglected. His pitch was that he was part of the alternative right, who believed nationalism came before globalization and American disengagement coming before the needs of corporate America's foreign profits.

But what Trump didn't seem to realise, or just didn't want to know is that the US president has many limitations. Power in the US is dispersed over various institutions which act as a barrier to any president thinking of driving through policies. The US president is a transitional position, in the sense that the specific president deals with the same underlying issues, rather than a different set of issues. Successive US presidents have to deal with maintaining US global interests, dealing with both global and regional threats and maintaining the country's dominant position. Considering Trump had no political experience he would have had to gather numerous advisors around him which effectively make him redundant. The world didn't have to wait long for Trump's U-turns. In fact, on April 12th 2017, Trump reversed his position on a number of foreign policy issues.

Trump made so many statements in support of Russia during his campaign that many considered Russia to have influenced the outcome of the Presidential election. Trump praised the ruling capabilities of Vladimir Putin and mentioned on more than one occasion that he got on well with Putin. When Trump announced Rex Tillerson as US Secretary of State (who at the time was leading ExxonMobil and had significant contracts in Russia) he positioned himself as someone who would be able to work and deal with Russia. But on April 12th 2017 Trump stated: *"We're not getting along with Russia at all. We may be at an all-time low in terms of a relationship with Russia."*¹ The suggestion that Russia and the US could become allies was always a lie, but served Trump well to get into the White House. A continental power is a direct challenge to America's position in the world and something the US knows well from its decade's long battle with the Soviet Union. Whilst today's Russia is not the Soviet Union, Russia still seeks to expand influence beyond its borders. Both Russia and the EU could be continental powers though the US does not want to see one dominated by the other. The US needs to keep both Russia's and Europe's power in check and an effective way of doing this involves allowing them to confront one another. Therefore what is good for the US is the exact opposite of what is good for Russia. There is little to no middle ground for compromise. Trump's statements finally aligned with the ground reality - the inherent conflict of strategic interests between the US and Russia.

Criticizing China was central to Trump's bid for presidency. Trump made China public enemy number one on his campaign trail. China, he declared repeatedly, had raped the US economy.² It had to stop. He was going to brand it a currency manipulator on his first day in office, opening the way for a range of punitive responses. There would be a deluge of tariffs on Chinese imports into the US, with steel singled out for early action. Jobs in industrial America had to be protected. Trump was extremely aggressive towards China and made this a mainstay of his election campaign. It was for these reasons that the summit between Donald Trump and Chinese premier Xi Jinping in Mar-a-Lago on April 6th and

April 7th 2017 was all the more important. The summit closed with friendly words about mutual understanding and respect including a shared interest in what the US Treasury Secretary, Steven Mnuchin, described as the *“need to get to a more balanced trade environment.”*³ But it eventually transpired Trump did not follow through on any of his electoral campaign pledges. Trump actually offered a good trade deal to China in exchange for help with North Korea, but also that he would no longer consider China a currency manipulator. It looks as though North Korea’s imminent achievement at the time of integrating a nuclear warhead onto a medium-range missile led to Trump to be practical. Trump put to bed any chance of a U-turn on his U-turn in November 2017 when he visited China.

Trump, in his campaign for the White House, called NATO obsolete stating that the US pays too much to ensure the security of allies. He said, *“NATO is costing us a fortune, and yes, we’re protecting Europe with NATO, but we’re spending a lot of money.”*⁴ So damaging was Trump’s electoral position that his office attempted to present the campaign promise as not being literal. But on 12th April 2017, standing next to NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, Trump made an unequivocal reversal on NATO when he stated, *“I said it [NATO] was obsolete. It’s no longer obsolete.”*⁵ Trump’s rhetoric served as a threat to European countries to send the message that Washington would focus on bilateral relations more than the NATO. However, those that subscribe to multilateralism and internationalism in the US policy making establishment forced the change.

Similarly, Trump said the US would leave NAFTA as it was costing American jobs and begin construction of a border wall to stop Mexican illegal immigrants entering the US. Trump eventually downgraded his NAFTA rhetoric from leaving the association to revising the current agreement. The much-publicised wall is not even close to beginning, it has yet to receive any congressional funding and it faces at least one lawsuit.

One year on, despite Trumps extremely disruptive behaviour, racism, support for the far right and constant bluster things remain unchanged, for the most part, or are following the path they were when he was elected.

US presidents operate in a world of constraints and limitations despite their rhetoric to the contrary. In Trump’s case, he confronted a reality which was more problematic due to the extreme positions he took during his electoral campaign. Trump is a weak president as he lost the popular vote and lacked broad support from the Republican Party. His approval rating, according to Gallup, soon after taking office was around 41%, among the lowest presidential approval ratings soon after inauguration. Trump won office by portraying himself as a radical isolationist, but such an extreme stance alienated him from those whose support was necessary to govern. This is why Trump made moves to shift his position on key issues hoping to gain support. Like all previous Presidents the reality made campaign promises outdated.

Trump’s rhetoric is designed to show he is responding the demands of his support base, but in reality his actions have maintained the status quo.

Whatever Trump believed his foreign policy was to be, the reality is that he has changed very little. A lesson the US public still haven’t learnt is when running for office rhetoric and reality of all the candidates are different things.

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¹ Trump says Russia relations may be at ‘all-time low,’ praises Tillerson trip, Fox News, 12 April 2017, <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2017/04/12/trump-says-russia-relations-may-be-at-all-time-low-praises-tillerson.html>

² See, <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2016/dec/10/china-trade-war-trump-tariffs-exports>

³ China Ready for ‘Balanced Trade Environment’ with United States, Breitbart Online, 7 April 2017, <http://www.breitbart.com/big-government/2017/04/07/steve-mnuchin-china-ready-for-balanced-trade-environment-with-united-states/>

⁴ Trump Says U.S. ‘Can’t Afford’ To Spend So Much On NATO, Radio free Europe, radio liberty Online, March 22nd 2016, <https://www.rferl.org/a/donald-trump-says-us-cannot-afford-spend-so-much-nato/27627522.html>

⁵ Trump on NATO, I said it was obsolete, it’s no longer obsolete, Washington Post, 12 April 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2017/04/12/trump-on-nato-i-said-it-was-obsolete-its-no-longer-obsolete/?utm_term=.a9e39282499d