Podcast

Trump and International Relations

Dr Filippo Boni and Dr Precious Chatterje-Doody:

PCD: The Presidency of Donald Trump promised to bring a seismic shift in the way in which politics and international relations were conducted. I'm Dr Precious Chatterje-Doody, a Lecturer in Politics an International Studies at Open University

FB: and I'm Dr Filippo Boni, a Lecturer in Politics and International Studies at Open University.

PCD: Today we're going to be looking back at the Trump Presidency, considering what some of the key developments that occurred between 2016 and 2021 can tell us about international relations, and how we can use International Relations theories to make sense of the key political and international issues that characterised this period.

PCD: One of the key takeaways from the documentary is that Trump has placed great emphasis on Asia as one of the key foreign policy priorities. Can you tell us a little bit more about the Trump administration's vision for Asia?

FB: Yes – Asia was one of the main geographical areas where the Trump administration focused its attention, primarily in relation to containing the rise of China. To this end, during a November 2017 speech in Vietnam, President Trump rolled out the US's vision for "a free and open Indo-Pacific — a place where sovereign and independent nations, with diverse cultures and many different dreams, can all prosper side-by-side, and thrive in freedom and in peace". At first glance, this may seem to be in line with the theory of International Relations known as Liberalism. This approach to IR sees cooperation among countries, mostly through institutions and international fora, as a way to promote peace and prosperity. At the heart of a liberal worldview are values like respect for human rights and freedom of expression and it is one of the main theories in international relations alongside Realism and Constructivism.

While the wording of the 2017 speech suggested a more multilateral approach to the region, such a tone conflicted with the message of "America First" as well as with the Trump

administration's "zero-sum" rhetoric in its relations with Asian partners – the idea that one partner's gain means another partner's loss. While China has been a clear focus of the US's Asia policy, such a zero-sum approach has many countries across Asia facing the difficult decision of having to choose between Washington and Beijing when it comes to their international partnership.

PCD: From what you are saying, and from what a number of commentators and analysts have suggested in the past couple of years, it seems that Mr Trump pushed back against the US's multilateral approach to its foreign policy. Can you tell us a little bit more about this shift?

FB: There a couple of examples that I think can exemplify this for us. In June 2017, President Trump issued a Statement on the Paris Climate Accord, that was dubbed "the latest example of Washington entering into an agreement that disadvantages the United States to the exclusive benefit of other countries". In July 2018, ahead of the NATO Brussels Summit, then President Donald Trump tweeted that "many countries in NATO, which we are expected to defend, are not only short of their current commitment of 2% (which is low), but are also delinquent for many years in payments that have not been made. Will they reimburse the U.S.?".

These two apparently unrelated statements have in fact something in common: they demonstrate how the Trump Presidency was characterised by a progressive move away from multilateralism towards a more isolationist and unilateral way of seeing the US's role in the world. In short, multilateralism can be defined as "the practice of co-ordinating national policies in groups of three or more states". By placing "America First" at the heart of his 2016 elections campaign, Mr Trump has sought to depart from the US's foreign policy paradigm that foregrounded international institutions and cooperation – a system the US has helped shaped decisively after the end of the Second World War – towards one that sees Washington operating in isolation in pursuing its national interest.

But the interesting thing here is that the boundaries between international policies and domestic priorities are sometimes quite blurred, and I think there are various examples during the Trump period that bear this out.

PCD: Yes, I absolutely agree, and the whole Russian meddling saga is a case in point. Investigations by the main US government departments and intelligence agencies unanimously concluded that the Russian state had interfered in the 2016 US Presidential election campaign. Meddling of this kind defies not only the democratic integrity of elections themselves, but also the principle of sovereignty, a central legal principle within the modern international system. According to this principle, foreign states have no right to intervene in the internal affairs of individual states in the international system, except in rare, specific

circumstances (notably in the case of internationally recognised human rights abuses). Whilst this violation of international law might be expected to generate significant diplomatic fallout, domestic issues ultimately influenced the US response.

First, the idea of electoral meddling is damaging to democratic legitimacy, particularly following close-run elections and Trump's early presidency was dogged by allegations – for which no evidence was subsequently found – that he had colluded in the manipulation. President Trump therefore had an understandable political interest not only in reiterating that no collusion had occurred, but in rejecting all related allegations outright. Second, Trump had initially campaigned on the basis that core US institutions were run by corrupt elites whose interests only he could challenge. This message resonated with his base, so it is perhaps unsurprising that he at first appeared to accept (though subsequently rowed back on this) President Putin's assurances rather than US institutions' pronouncements on the affair. It's an ironic case of political expedience at the time running against that core message of putting "America First".

FB: And yet it was that "America First" message from 2016 that so clearly resonated with a lot of people, as did the MAGA slogan of making America 'great' again. They might not involve clear policy proposals, but they are big ideas that can engage people – what does this tell us about how politics works?

PCD: These give us some really clear examples of how much emotion – not just rationality – matters in politics and international relations. Many explanations of political behaviour are based on a rational actor model, the idea that people make logical choices that suit their material interests. However, one of the key trends that Donald Trump's presidency has brought to public attention is the importance of both emotion and identity in International Relations. It is not always possible to separate reasoned responses out from our emotional reactions, since we tend to judge what our interests are based on how we see ourselves and our place in the world. Yet this is subject to change through our social interactions.

Throughout the early 2000s, for example, voters in rural 'rust belt' manufacturing states like Michigan, Wisconsin and Iowa tended to see politics as a contest between working people and the business class. People's class perception tended to inform their voting affiliation with either the Democratic or Republican parties. Yet social changes over time saw these voters increasingly resentful of what they saw as technocratic, corporate and elite-led erosion of their communities. Trump, the self-styled 'anti-establishment' candidate, carried many of these areas in 2016, but as a billionaire businessman, it is perhaps not surprising that his presidency did not deliver the benefits those voters anticipated. In this case, voter behaviour is less well explained by the rational actor model than what IR theorists refer to as a process of social construction – where interactions between people, and the ways in which they

interpret and reproduce the structures of the world around them, work to create the social reality in which they live.

This point about the social construction of reality is really interesting, and it applies to a wide range of policy issues that have made the headlines throughout the Trump Presidency. One particular area where perception seemed to be at times more important than reality was migration, and the way in which the narrative around it was built.

FB: Yes - Part and parcel of Mr Trump's approach to international and domestic issues alike has been the way in which key issues have been portrayed to American and global audiences. Ever since being a Presidential candidate, Mr Trump has framed the debate around immigration as an "us vs them" dichotomy, aimed at galvanizing support for his policies. In the run up to the 2016 Presidential elections, then candidate Donald Trump tweeted with reference to Muslims that the US should not "allow people coming into this country who have this hatred of the United States and of people that are not Muslim." Similarly, on the issue around illegal immigration from Mexico, Mr Trump has advocated for the need to build, in his own words, "a big & beautiful wall", also adding the slogan "build a wall & crime will fall".

Poststructuralism is one of the approaches to understand International Relations that places great emphasis on language and its uses. By insisting on a certain language and discourse in framing political issues, the aim is for the public to absorb and accept certain meanings and understandings of events. From a poststructuralist perspective, the discourse around immigration put forward by Mr Trump is part of a wider political agenda aimed at reinforcing binary views (good vs evil; legal vs illegal; Christians vs Muslims) that are conducive to particular types of policy (i.e. securitisation of migration) grounded on perceived threats emerging from a different group.

This discussion about the way in which issues are presented to the public brings inevitably into the discussion the role that the media play in all this. Trump has openly challenged media outlets by accusing them of spreading fake news. But how about Trump's own claims and tweets?

PCD: Well, the Washington Post's fact checking database has logged over 30,000 false or misleading claims made by President Trump during his term. Global news providers initially struggled with how to deal with this, but recent research sheds light on both the effects of such false information, and the ways in which (not) to confront it.

First, audiences tend to select content they agree with and ignore that which they don't. At crucial times, false stories are widely shared and believed, but the effects of this are partisan:

conservative US news websites are most likely to reproduce false stories, with conservative individuals are more likely to believe them. Yet, liberal media outlets are more likely to change their agenda in response, and mainstream media increasingly cover stories that originated in fringe groups. So, even though less partisan audiences still consult mainstream sources, broader fringe stories reach them.

Fact checks don't always help. They can repeat false claims to a wider audience, increasing their traction, because repetition is linked to belief – even if the repetition comes as part of a retraction. Social media compounds this: individuals are more likely to believe stories that their contacts like, share or comment on, and social media comments can influence people's opinions even when they know that the commenters may not be genuine.

The 2020 Presidential election campaign saw social networks add 'health warnings' to disputed stories, and prompt users to visit and comment on links before sharing. However, with most news consumers unmotivated to critically assess their sources, such measures may not make a big difference. Of perhaps more interest, then, is the unprecedented step taken by multiple US television broadcasters – including Fox - to cut short President Trump's unsubstantiated allegations of vote manipulation mid-broadcast. Prioritising journalistic standards over 'newsworthiness' can reduce political actors to manipulate media coverage, and I suppose that's something that Trump felt pretty strongly after his social media ban in early 2021.

FB: Thanks a lot, Precious – I think from our conversation it was very interesting to see how International Relations Theory can help us make sense of the world we live in, especially at a time in which great power relations are in flux, and some of the key tenets of the rule based international order are being challenged, as we have discussed earlier with regards to the Paris Climate Accord and NATO.

We're drawing to a close, but before you leave, if you enjoyed this podcast you can also have a look at the other two OpenLearn sources that we have put together, one on Trump's Twitter diplomacy and another one about US-China relations.