

Just in case, Australia must have Trump's ear

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He's down in the polls. But Australia must have a diplomatic strategy in case Donald Trump claws himself 270 electoral votes and smirks through a vulgar inauguration.

Our embassy can't wait until then. To start with, ambassador Joe Hockey needs to locate Trump's five official foreign policy advisers (none of whom is a recognisable name) or buttonhole one of the tow-haired Trump family as they emerge from Fox News studios. When he has their attention he can state boldly and bluntly why they should listen to Australia.

His spiel should go something like this: "We are not one of those freeloading allies to whom candidate Trump refers. We are currently running a third of the training exercises for the Iraqi army. We fly next to your planes fighting Islamic State.

"We host crucial US communications facilities at Pine Gap and North West Cape. They alert you to any missiles launched at America and send orders to your submarines. We host \$860 billion in US investment. We are committed to 12 new submarines and 72 joint strike fighters. And, yes, we have been with you in every conflict the past 100 years." The last bit of boilerplate, used by Australian prime ministers as required, overlooks the fact Vietnam, Iraq and almost certainly Afghanistan were ill-judged. Disastrous in the case of Vietnam and Iraq, squanderously wasteful in Afghanistan. But right now our loyal involvement gives us a right to press a case.

And the case needs to be put urgently because Trump foreign policy is wide open.

Our first concern is the candidate's notion (repeated at a rally in Iowa in August) that the US can pull out of its defence commitment to Japan and South Korea. Right-wing politicians in both countries are taking him at his word and urging nuclear arms. Japan can move to nuclear weaponisation within a mere six months.

"If you do this you will be dismantling the security guarantees that have maintained the balance in northeast Asia."

That's what Hockey needs to be telling Trump advisers in a voice as forceful as an Australian diplomat has ever used with our ally.

The second Trump policy Australia must undermine in Republican circles is the candidate's notion of a 45 per cent tax on Chinese imports. Nothing like this was proposed by Marco Rubio, Ted Cruz or Jeb Bush. Trump's policy amounts to tearing up the economic integration that has hugely benefited both China and the US. It would mandate retaliation by China, opening a trade war, potentially tilting us into a deep recession or worse.

Right now no one can place bets on the character of a Trump foreign policy.

It's not inconceivable he could strike a rapport with Russia's Vladimir Putin and China's Xi Jinping because authoritarian leaders like to cut deals and Trump loves deals. Call this a Dreikaiserbund, a Three Emperors' League based on a 19th-century understanding between Germany, Austria and Russia.

On the other hand, his economic populism could trash the carefully constructed US-China relationship. This bilateral has been prickly at times, challenged by Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea and by some Americans wanting to fight for the traditional primacy. But it is fundamentally different from the relationship between the US and the old Soviet Union and always alive to the possibilities of the future.

On China, Hockey can speak not just for Australia but for America's big European allies, for the 10 members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, for Canada, New Zealand and even Japan.

This is how he might pitch it.

"Please let the candidate know America's own prosperity depends on the addition to global demand that Asia — mainly China — is set to deliver. China will haul another 860 million people into its middle class by 2030, all ready to buy American goods, send their kids to US universities and fill your hotels and airlines with big-spending tourists. On this, all US allies, even Japan, are saying with Australia: Please, no trade war with China."

While our diplomats seek this conversation with the Trump camp, take reassurance from the language of ANZUS.

When the treaty was signed in 1951 the Americans insisted on words weaker than that of NATO. Article four of the treaty obliges the partners, in the event of an attack on the Pacific territory of one or the other, only to "act to meet the common danger in accordance with its constitutional process".

Or as article three says, whenever the parties are threatened, "the parties will consult together".

Consult. Not mobilise, not send a gunboat, not raise an expeditionary force. "The ANZUS Treaty obliges us to consult." That is the rote answer for any Australian minister who gets asked whether ANZUS would apply in the Taiwan Strait, as foreign minister Alexander Downer was in 2004, or in the East China Sea, as defence minister David Johnston was in 2014.

Any angry lurch by president Trump would require no jumping to attention on our part.

Malcolm Turnbull and Foreign Minister Julie Bishop should have the words ready if the worst happens in four weeks and the air gets filled with the new president's bellicosity.

Would we have to join in, as a loyal ally?

It's simple. Repeat after me.

"The ANZUS Treaty obliges us to consult."