

Foreign trip fails to change Donald Trump's image



Donald Trump with Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed, left, and Saudi Arabia's King Salman at the Arab Islamic American Summit in Riyadh.

Greg Sheridan, *The Australian*, 12:00AM May 27, 2017

As he travelled around the world this week, Donald Trump was as perplexing and puzzling as he is when he's in Washington or Florida. He did so much, and he did so little. He was in Riyadh, Jerusalem and Rome, the holy cities of the three Abrahamic religions. He attended a NATO summit in Brussels, which will be followed by a meeting of the G7 in Sicily.

Meanwhile the world, it seemed, was in flames. Savage terror, seemingly inspired by Islamic State, struck innocent teenage girls in Manchester. Equally innocent Indonesian policemen were blown up, also apparently by an Islamic State-inspired bomb, in Jakarta. Another caliphate-admiring group went on a murderous anti-Christian rampage in Marawi in the southern Philippines. There was a bombing in Bangkok.

But the biggest geostrategic issues would not slumber either. The North Koreans launched another ballistic missile. The US Navy, meanwhile, conducted its first freedom-of-navigation exercise in the South China Sea under Trump, sailing within 12 nautical miles of an artificial Chinese structure near Mischief Reef to demonstrate to the Chinese, and everyone else, that it does not recognise Chinese sovereignty over disputed and artificial territories Beijing has established there.

In some ways that was the biggest geostrategic event of the week. But the madness of Washington also played out. The torrent of leaks against the President from the US intelligence community continued. Now we know that Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner is under FBI scrutiny as part of its seemingly endless investigation into alleged links between the Russians and the Trump presidential campaign.

Leaks emerged of memos that fired FBI director James Comey had apparently written to himself, which allegedly disclose that Trump asked him to go soft in his investigation of former national security adviser Mike Flynn, whom Trump sacked for lying to Vice-President Mike Pence over his connections with the Russians.

And just to show that they will leak to hurt Trump even if Trump is not the subject of the leak, someone in US intelligence gave The New York Times a string of exclusives disclosing secret information about the still-active British investigation into the Manchester bombing. Which mightily annoyed the Brits.

The problem with assessing the international situation, and America's role in it, right now is that all these developments profoundly affect each other, and they all affect what Trump achieves, or doesn't achieve, in his first overseas trip as President.

Trump's messages on his travels so far are anodyne and conventional enough. He is happy to sell the Saudis more than \$US100 billion in weapons and to receive from them promised investment into the US of several hundred billion dollars. His political message to the Saudis is this: I won't criticise you on human rights; like you, I think Iran is the big danger in the Middle East; please fight terrorists; and continue to give me money. The only real difference here from Barack Obama is the message on Iran.

Potentially, that's a big difference. Yet, tellingly, this week Trump was criticised by John Bolton, a former undersecretary of state under George W. Bush and one of Trump's staunchest foreign policy supporters, for essentially continuing Obama's Iran policy. This may seem bizarre as Trump, in great contrast to Obama, has identified Iran as America's No 1 state enemy in the Middle East. But, Bolton argues, the administration confirmed another annual waiver of sanctions on Iran, which means it is saying Iran is basically abiding by the nuclear deal Obama made with it. Trump was fiercely critical of this agreement, but it seems now he will keep it going.

In Israel, Trump was warmer and sweeter than Obama, but again Iran was the main point of difference with Obama's previous policy. He did recognise Israeli sovereignty over that part of Jerusalem which everybody acknowledges is Israeli: West Jerusalem. He went to the Western Wall to pray and no US president had done that before. The wall, formerly known as the Wailing Wall, is notionally in East Jerusalem and is part of the territory Israel occupied in 1967. But not even Obama at his very worst — and that was indeed very bad — ever suggested that the Israelis will give up the wall in any peace deal.

Trump also visited the Holocaust museum Yad Vashem and made a strong, pro-Israeli speech.

But equally he continues to claim that the Palestinian leadership, under Mahmoud Abbas, is ready for peace with Israel and that a peace deal is just around the corner. There is no evidence for either of these assertions. Trump also went to Bethlehem to meet Abbas and smothered him, too, in warm encomiums.

The Saudis like Trump because he is anti-Iran. The Israelis like Trump because he is not Obama and is, in declarative terms at least, far more pro-Israel. But Trump's blithe assertions that a Palestinian peace deal is there for the taking and Kushner can negotiate it is surely just as fatuous and lacking in substance as all the hot air the Obama administration expended on the issue. The obstacles to any proximate two-state settlement are enormous. Take just one set of obstacles. The Israelis could only allow a Palestinian state if they continued to control its borders on both its eastern and western sides, and if the new state is comprehensively demilitarised in a way the Israelis can enforce and guarantee.

Otherwise, the Israeli strategic class believes, the aged bureaucrats at the top of the Palestinian Authority will lose power to the more robust Hamas terrorist group, which still controls Gaza, and Israel will face intolerable security threats — including presumably barrages of rockets and missiles — from the new state. The Palestinians could never agree to such a truncated version of sovereignty for their new state. And of course there are a thousand other obstacles. The telling thing is that there has been not a word from the Trump administration on how such obstacles might be overcome.

So, what do Trump's words actually mean? The Israelis are hearing the Trump words they like and just tuning out from the rest. Trump is either speaking in serious ignorance — hard to believe for any president — or he has resorted to the oldest trick in the book: merely talk about a peace settlement to minimise the political pressure from friends of the Palestinians. Or he actually believes he can bring peace, perhaps as sincerely as he believed that Ted Cruz's father was involved in the assassination of John F. Kennedy. And of course, sensibly, he is not going to move the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.

This is one of the continuing problems with Trump. There is no way of knowing which of his words to take seriously.

Then came the strangest meeting of the Trump tour so far, with Pope Francis in Rome. Francis is perhaps as strange a fit for his office as Trump is for his. Despite appearances, the Pope is overall deeply orthodox, if not outright conservative, on theology and morals. He is always talking about the devil, constantly defends the right to life of the unborn, endorses the physical reality of miracles, pronounces miracle workers as saints, and so on. But the Western media, which has performed a secular canonisation of Francis, politely ignores all that stuff. It listens instead to the Pope's political and economic pronouncements, which are routinely left-wing and seem to reflect entirely an Argentine and Peronist view of economics and international relations. Francis is also a big supporter of the most radical action possible to combat climate change. In this sense he harks back to a kind of premodern papal mindset, almost rejecting the modern economy altogether.

All this is pretty much the opposite of Trump. Yet according to a Vatican press release — and surely from such a source there could never be any question about its scrupulous accuracy — the two men hit it off fine. The single weirdest moment came when the Pope gave the President copies of his papal encyclicals, and Trump promised to read them. Then Trump went to the NATO summit. He said generally nice things about NATO, and nice things about US allies, but naturally he complained that so few NATO member nations, only five out of 28, actually spend the agreed minimum 2 per cent of gross national product on defence.

Here he is in direct continuity with Bush and Obama. In security terms, the Europeans are free loaders on the US and have been for decades.

NATO's general folly was evident in its admission of Montenegro as its 29th member. NATO expansion has been a strategic mistake, not because it annoys the Russians but because it devalues the meaning of the NATO security guarantee. Trump rather ostentatiously declined to mention the NATO principle of collective security, that an attack on one is an attack on all. But who really thinks that the US, much less any of the flaccid Europeans, would go to war to protect Montenegro?

At the same time Montenegro is caught up in its own political crisis, partly over whether it should seek to join NATO at all.

Next for Trump comes the G7.

So where does this trip leave us? The answer is probably with no discernible change from before the trip began. Trump made his usual quota of verbal gaffes, but they don't matter much. More important is that there is still no way to determine which things he says will actually have consequences.

The ongoing political circus in Washington reflects poorly on all participants and clearly hampers the episodic efforts Trump makes to put his presidency on a more even keel, to give the sense of steady progress. Plainly, the highly politicised intelligence services are leaking furiously against Trump. These services were politicised above all under Obama. The "deep state", as the elite leadership is sometimes called, will not accept the legitimacy of the Trump presidency.

This seems to be for three reasons. Trump ran a campaign of astonishing vulgarity and crassness. He lost the popular vote by three million. And the legend has arisen that the Russian hacking into Democratic emails swung it for him. The reality is that Trump's victory was entirely legitimate and there is almost no prospect he will be leaving office as a result of anything that has happened, or been revealed, so far. There is no evidence that Trump has committed any impeachable offence. If he had done, surely it would have been leaked by now. But the congressional Democrats and the liberal media — The New York Times, The Washington Post, CNN and the like — have become a grotesque mirror caricature of what they claimed the Republicans and the much smaller right-wing media were under Obama.

Destroying Trump is their only priority. Nothing else matters. Trump aids their cause by his wildly undisciplined tweets and the general weirdness of so much that he says. This means that perfectly defensible actions, such as moving on FBI director Comey, who took a bizarre and politicised role during the campaign, become instantly sinister.

Similarly many of the specific allegations against Trump — such as that he revealed sensitive Israeli information to the Russian foreign minister — rest entirely in the interpretation of secret events put out by The New York Times or The Washington Post. And if you trust them you're nuts.

Julie Bishop was wise on television this week to point out, when questioned on this matter, that Trump denies the version of events the Post reported. But Bishop is typical of political leaders and US allies around the world, having to respond in her presentation of the US alliance as much to the circus in Washington as to the substance of what the Trump administration is actually doing, such as the US Navy's freedom-of-navigation exercise in the South China Sea.

The question is this: will Trump's wildly dysfunctional style and the frenzy of his political enemies overwhelm the good things his administration is trying to do, in a foreign policy that is much more conventional, both for good and for bad, than we ever expected?