

How Trump is reimagining America's role by Sholto Byrnes

Sholto Byrnes is a senior fellow at the Institute of Strategic and International Studies, Malaysia. This article originally appeared in The National (UAE), May 23, 2017 and was reprinted in New from ISIS Malaysia.

There are many reasons to welcome Donald Trump's speech to the US-Arab-Islamic Summit in Riyadh last Sunday, not least his declaration: "We are not here to lecture. We are not here to tell other people how to live, what to do, who to be, or how to worship. Instead, we are here to offer partnership based on shared interests and values to pursue a better future."

While there are many around the world who would be very glad to hear a little less about why every country should be more like the United States, there has been predictable criticism from the human rights lobby. Those who believe that "human rights" are whatever the West defines them as, are cross that Trump will not publicly berate states that don't meet their standards. They view it as putting material gains ahead of moral concerns.

Just as they were dismayed when US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson refused to make the usual song and dance over the US State Department's annual human rights report in March, critics claim that Trump's "principled realism" is nothing more than realpolitik, often describing it as "cynical" to make it clear how immoral they think it is.

If it were just realpolitik, there would still be much to recommend that as a policy reset. If taken to heart, the words of Brent Scowcroft, national security adviser under the first President Bush – "What the realist fears is the consequences of idealism" – could have prevented much of the military misadventures and fraying of alliances that have contributed to death and instability so far this century.

But there are reasons to believe that it could be much more than that. Close examination of a speech Tillerson gave to State Department employees this month reveals a very telling distinction. "If we condition too heavily that others must adopt this value that we've come to over a long history of our own, it really creates obstacles to our ability to advance our national security interests, our economic interests. It doesn't mean that we don't advocate for and aspire to freedom, human dignity and the treatment of people the world over. We do. But that doesn't mean that's the case in every situation."

The US will still stand up for its beliefs, in other words. But saying that the US has come to its values "over a long history of our own", and that insisting others adopt them "creates obstacles," is, I believe, a final acknowledgement that the values that the US – or any society – have arrived at are a

process, during which those values change. That process and those values are conditional on the society in question.

A realpolitik that says: we think that this country is badly and wrongly run, but we don't care – since aligning ourselves with it is in our interests, may be justly accused of being cynical.

The "principled realism" of Trump and Tillerson – insofar as it has been elaborated so far – however, is quite different. There is the implicit admission that other countries may have had their own reasons to come up with different sets of values; and on that basis the US will deal with them respectfully and ally with them, without telling them off in public because some of their freedoms and rights are not the same as those in America.

Recognition of the process is important, as is the fact that the conclusions will vary, both over time and according to the country. This ought to be obvious, but since it does not fit with the claim that human rights are, and have always been, universal – as opposed to being contingent on the decisions of particular men and women at particular times and places – it is often ignored.

In fact, lots of the rights that Western countries belabor other countries for not enshrining into law are very new. LGBT rights are an obvious example, and even after legalization took place, it took far, far longer for the general culture in many countries to change. Until it did, these rights under the law were only half freedoms in effect because of the discrimination commonly practiced.

When Western countries change their values and laws they have not hesitated in the past to hammer other individuals and states that haven't instantly followed suit.

While there are many principles they have in common, the US and the West are also always going to have significantly different values, and therefore laws and rights, from Arab and Muslim majority countries. If the White House is now showing greater understanding and respect for these genuinely held differences, this is a very encouraging sign. It is not an abandonment of what the US stands for, and nor is it cynicism. It is realism, yes, but it's also tolerance: and a genuine basis for a new partnership going forward.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.