

There is still no US Ambassador to Australia, but it is neither an insult nor a concern

Written by Sandeep Gopalan, Pro Vice-Chancellor (Academic Innovation) & Professor of Law, Deakin University

Last week's [sudden announcement](#) that the man assigned as the next United States ambassador to Australia will instead be posted to South Korea has generated [concern among some commentators](#)

US President Donald Trump nominated Admiral Harry Harris as [ambassador to Canberra](#) in February. Former Ambassador John Berry left his post in September 2016, meaning it has been vacant for 19 months.

Read more: [***As a new defence chief comes in, Australia must focus its attention on its neighbours***](#)

Former Deputy Prime Minister Tim Fischer has described the delay in appointing a new ambassador as an “[insult and with impact](#)”, while former Prime Minister [Kevin Rudd](#) has claimed that “Australia, from President Trump’s perspective, is a second-class ally”.

Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, though, has said he can “[well understand](#)” the decision to reallocate Harris to South Korea, given the Admiral’s expertise.

There is no need for overreaction, because US-Australia relations are in safe hands. Chargé d’Affaires - the [official in charge of a diplomatic mission](#) when the ambassador is absent or the position is vacant – [James Carouso](#) is the acting ambassador, pending another appointment.

What does an ambassador do?

The role of an ambassador is to represent the interests of a country. They are the highest-ranking representative of a state in the country or international organisation to which

There is still no US Ambassador to Australia, but it is neither an insult nor a concern

Written by Sandeep Gopalan, Pro Vice-Chancellor (Academic Innovation) & Professor of Law, Deakin University

they have been appointed. In addition to representing the state at negotiations, state dinners, and events, the ambassador also manages the staff of the embassy.

Ambassadors are the heads of embassies. Their duties include protecting and defending the reputation and image of their country, assessing effectiveness of its policies in the host state, reporting information, protecting the welfare of citizens, and promoting cooperation across business, education, science, technology, culture, and national security domains.

Specific to the [United States](#), the ambassador's role also involves [coordination of the various agencies](#) (for instance, coordinating between the departments of defence, commerce, and treasury on sanctions) that may be represented in a given country, because the US typically has a larger footprint than other countries. The US ambassador is appointed by the president, and reports to the Secretary of State.

Given the functional requirements of the position, ambassadors might be expected to possess serious foreign policy expertise and experience. However, this is not always the case.

Read more: [How do you become an ambassador?](#)

Over the years, the US and other countries have appointed [businessmen](#), [ex-politicians](#), [fundraisers](#), and people from outside the diplomatic establishment to ambassadorial positions.

Arguably, such appointments reflect the [diminished role of ambassadors](#). The reality is that modern foreign policy work actually happens at home – in the external affairs departments of governments. In the US, foreign policy is the domain of the Department of State, which is typically headed by a powerful [secretary of state](#).

. Ex-CIA director Mike Pompeo was confirmed as the new Secretary of State on April 26 after

There is still no US Ambassador to Australia, but it is neither an insult nor a concern

Written by Sandeep Gopalan, Pro Vice-Chancellor (Academic Innovation) & Professor of Law, Deakin University

Trump fired Rex Tillerson.

Why the vacancy is not an insult

The Trump administration has recently been preoccupied by a number of high-profile [problems with executive appointments](#) and resignations. The withdrawal of Trump's nominee to lead Veteran Affairs is just [one illustration](#)

On the ambassadorial front, the Trump administration has been [particularly slow](#). Of the 186 ambassadorial positions in global capitals, there are [currently 62 vacancies](#). About 17 of these are because the Senate has not yet confirmed the president's nominee.

Another reason for delays in ambassadorial appointments may be [budget cuts](#) imposed on the State Department. These cuts have led former senior diplomats to accuse the administration of [gutting America's diplomatic capabilities](#)

Moving Admiral Harris to Seoul is not an insult or reflection of Australia's "second-class" status. It can be explained by the simple reality of the [heightened diplomatic activity in the Korean peninsula](#)

In fact, Harris' appointment in the first place belies criticism that the US treats Australia as "second class". Harris was previously commander of the US Pacific forces, and was [appointed because of his strong record on China](#) - indicating the importance of Australia in US strategy for the region.

Trump's sudden [announcement of a summit with Kim Jong-un](#) after a prolonged period of exchanging insults and escalating threat of war caught the foreign policy establishment by surprise. Harris' changed appointment merely reflects the need for a diplomat with strong military experience in a high-risk arena.

There is still no US Ambassador to Australia, but it is neither an insult nor a concern

Written by Sandeep Gopalan, Pro Vice-Chancellor (Academic Innovation) & Professor of Law, Deakin University

Read more: [**Five assumptions we make about North Korea – and why they're wrong**](#)

Equally, the transfer is a luxury afforded by the strong relationship between Australia and the US, where an urgent appointment may not be necessary. US-Australia relations have been resilient even without an ambassador in place.

To recollect, Trump's now infamous phone call with Malcolm Turnbull [did not adversely affect the relationship](#) , as evidenced by [warmth exhibited by both sides during Turnbull's visit](#) to the White House in February.

Aside from the friendship at the highest level, ministerial and other contacts have sufficed to ensure cooperation on bilateral and multilateral matters.

At the same time, a quick appointment would be desirable. [Australia is a close ally](#) with a stable relationship, but sits in a region with escalating tensions.

Australian warships were apparently “[challenged](#)” by Chinese navy vessels in the South China Sea as they were en route to Ho Chi Minh City on April 15 this year.

[China also conducted massive live-fire drills](#) in the South China Sea earlier this month, with at least 40 ships participating.

These incidents present a challenge to both Australia and [the US](#) . Tensions with Russia, Iran, and North Korea, the Trans Pacific Partnership, [trade tariffs](#) , joint military engagements, and other matters of import would all benefit from the presence of a US ambassador.

There is still no US Ambassador to Australia, but it is neither an insult nor a concern

Written by Sandeep Gopalan, Pro Vice-Chancellor (Academic Innovation) & Professor of Law, Deakin University

The new ambassador's immediate priority is likely to be to assuage wounded public sentiments and rebuild confidence in Australia's status as a key Washington ally.

Then there are the more challenging tasks of responding to China, cyber and maritime security threats, trade conflicts, and the diurnal consequences from unprecedented presidential foreign policy-making by tweet.

Sandeep Gopalan does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organization that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.

Authors: Sandeep Gopalan, Pro Vice-Chancellor (Academic Innovation) & Professor of Law, Deakin University

Read more <http://theconversation.com/there-is-still-no-us-ambassador-to-australia-but-it-is-neither-an-insult-nor-a-concern-95711>