CENTRE FOR EUROPEAN REFORM

Trump's foreign policy: Two years of living dangerously

by Ian Bond

US President Donald Trump came into office in 2017 with an instinctive approach to foreign policy, and little knowledge. He strongly believed that alliances weakened the US, because allies took more than they gave, and spent less than the US on their defence. He was convinced that free trade enabled America's trading partners to cheat it, because America imported more than it exported. He disliked international organisations, which he saw as fettering US power, and preferred to deal bilaterally with other nation-states. He respected foreign strong-men (notably Russian President Vladimir Putin, but also Xi Jinping of China and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of Turkey) more than other democratic leaders, whom he saw as weak.

The last two years have not changed Trump's view of the world, or reassured US allies. A Trump doctrine of sorts has emerged, particularly in Trump's own speech to the UN General Assembly in September 2018 and in speeches by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo at the German Marshall Fund in Brussels in December 2018 and to the World Economic Forum in Davos on January 22nd 2019.

In his UN speech, Trump attacked international organisations, reiterated his opposition to free trade and proclaimed: "We reject the ideology of globalism, and we embrace the doctrine of patriotism". Pompeo in Brussels attacked the EU, as Trump often does, suggesting that it placed the interests of "bureaucrats in Brussels" before those of member-states and their populations. In Davos he argued that no international body could stand up for a people as well as their own leaders could. Allies' anxiety levels increased when media reports in January 2019 claimed that Trump had several times raised the possibility of the US withdrawing from NATO.

Trump's officials say that while some of the principles that have governed international relations in the last 70 years are still valid, others need to be jettisoned. They claim that Trump's views on international organisations reflect those of ordinary Americans (who do not see how the 'Western project' of the post-Cold War period has helped them) and even ordinary Europeans. Trump is said to be willing to work through international organisations where the US is dominant, but not those where power is distributed among several significant players.

Image: © NATO

Trump is not alone among American politicians in attaching more importance to bilateral relations between states than to multilateral relationships mediated through international organisations; but he also has an unusually personalised view of international relations, relying on his ability to make deals with foreign leaders. This results in unpredictable lurches in policy, often announced on Twitter, that leave allied countries and his own officials struggling to respond. Before he met North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un, he called him "Little Rocket Man" and threatened him with war; after their summit in 2018 he told a rally in West Virginia: "We fell in love" – even though Kim seems to be continuing North Korea's nuclear programme. Having met Xi in Florida and Beijing, Trump tweeted that despite US-China trade tensions, "President Xi and I will always be friends". Coupled with this reliance on personal ties is Trump's impulsive decision-making: after Erdoğan complained about the US's Kurdish allies in northern Syria, who are affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), proscribed as a terrorist organisation by the US and others, Trump abruptly announced that he was withdrawing US forces from Syria, without consulting his national security team. The announcement also caught allies fighting alongside US troops unawares. And as part of his rapprochement with Kim he announced the suspension of US-South Korea military exercises – again, without consulting his military advisers.

Both the Trump doctrine and Trump's actions disturb America's European allies. Despite Brexit, most European countries see multilateralism as the best way to protect their interests and to promote stability and prosperity in the world. At first, allies comforted themselves with the idea that Trump was kept under control by an 'axis of adults' in key national security positions around him. But by the end of 2018, all those who could plausibly have claimed to be trying to restrain the president's worst instincts had left office, the last to go being James Mattis, the Defense Secretary. In his resignation letter, Mattis wrote: "My views on treating allies with respect and also being clear-eyed about both malign actors and strategic competitors are strongly held and informed by over four decades of immersion in these issues", and made clear that Trump disagreed with him on these points.

How should US allies respond, faced with at least two and perhaps six more years of a president who appears to view them with more suspicion than he does adversaries like Putin, and who seeks to undermine organisations fundamental to their security and prosperity? France and Germany have talked up the concept of European 'strategic autonomy' from the US; the Aachen Treaty, signed on January 22nd 2019 by French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel, includes a mutual defence commitment and provisions on defence co-operation that Merkel described as "contributing to the creation of a European army". Poland, on the other hand, has tried to strengthen its bilateral defence ties to the US, offering to pay for a so-called 'Fort Trump' so that the US could station an armoured division (up to 20,000 troops) there. Poland and the US are also co-hosting a conference in February on Middle East stability and in particular Iran that seems to be part of a US effort to undermine EU support for the 2015 deal to end Tehran's nuclear weapons programme – an agreement from which the Trump administration withdrew in 2018.

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Neither the Franco-German nor the Polish approach is likely to mitigate the problems caused by Trump. 'Strategic autonomy' and 'European army' will remain empty terms as long as European allies continue to under-invest in defence. NATO estimates the average defence spend of European NATO members in 2018 as 1.5 per cent of GDP; only the UK and Latvia met NATO's two targets of spending 2 per cent of GDP on defence and allocating 20 per cent of defence expenditure to new equipment. For the US to rely on bilateral defence and security relationships, however, would weaken NATO and EU co-operation, and could cause tension with other European partners, who may feel that in a crisis they would be a lower priority for US assistance.

The best policy for allied governments is not to respond to Trump's rhetoric with their own, positive or negative. European governments should instead use NATO's 70th anniversary celebration in Washington in April to recommit themselves to defending each other; and they should increase defence spending and (whether in the EU or NATO) ensure that resources are used efficiently and effectively on common needs. Finally, they should work with the many military figures, officials and politicians in the US who still see the value of America's alliances and the danger of Trump's isolationism leaving a geopolitical vacuum in the world.

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