

SECURITY STRATEGY

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Power outage

rather than an economic and political fact. Furthermore, his more mainstream advisers have not managed to “normalize” the administration; at best, they have achieved less bad outcomes, such as kicking the responsibility of reviewing the Iran nuclear deal over to Congress rather than just tearing it up.

Under these circumstances, the publication of the Trump administration’s first National Security Strategy in late December of 2017 was met with significantly more than the customary tepid specialist interest. But the document does not resolve the tension between the normalizers and the radicals – indeed, it enshrines it.

On the one hand, the NSS makes dozens of references to partners and allies. It also makes a point of restating the president’s late and reluctant re-commitment to the mutual defense clause in Article 5 of the NATO Treaty. On the other hand, it emphatically reinforces the dictate delivered in a now-notorious op-ed written in May by National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster and Gary Cohn, president of the National Economic Council: the fundamental paradigm of American power in the age of Trump is one of zero-sum competition rather than cooperation. And the rationale made by the NSS for US support of its allies in Europe and elsewhere is self-interested in the narrowest possible terms: America’s “allies and partners magnify US power and extend US influence.”

The NSS also insists, rather remarkably, that the institutions of domestic democracy must be made resilient to political interference from abroad. This new emphasis on challenges to US dominance by other great powers – specifically, Russia and China – was amplified shortly after publication of the NSS by the new National Defense Strategy and its motto of “compete, deter, and win.” Written at the Pentagon under the aegis of Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis, this document is notable for its embrace of allies and partners, which it describes as “crucial” to American strategy. Given the increasingly aggressive global assertiveness of both Russia and China, this re-focusing of US strategy makes sense, and Europeans can and should engage with it.

If only the commander in chief agreed. President Trump has made it clear – in his speeches on the launch of the NSS, his Davos speech and his State of the Union address – that he does not share the strategic framework advocated by his advisors. Trump continues to argue for cooperation with Putin’s Russia, and sees China chiefly as a trade adversary; the top three threats he obsesses over are immigrants, terrorists and North Korea. He remains disdainful of the notion that has underpinned US strategy since World War II: American stewardship of a liberal international order is in the American interest.

Even more importantly, Trump appears to believe that the US should be able to use nuclear weapons, would win a trade war against China and could emerge victorious from a preventive “bloody nose” strike against North Korea. Should any of these come to pass, the world would become a different place. But even if they are avoided, the president’s inability or unwillingness to tone down his rhetoric, his overt disagreements with his advisors or his contempt for allies will lead America’s friends to hedge their bets. As for America’s adversaries, they will feel encouraged to fill the vacuum the superpower leaves behind.

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Keeping Washington tethered to the international community during the president’s tenure will make it easier to repair the wreckage he leaves behind

BY CHARLES A. KUPCHAN

One down, three to go. And judging by Trump’s first year in office, the next three should be long and painful. As the US backs away from its traditional role as team captain, its “America First” foreign policy is setting the world on edge. Trump has already pulled out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership and the Paris Climate Agreement. Next on his chopping block may well be the Iran nuclear deal and US participation in NAFTA and the World Trade Organization.

America’s deliberate undermining of the rules-based international order it worked so hard to establish after World War II has left America’s partners understandably vexed, and wondering when it is time to give up on Trump. But even if justified, their approach is ill-advised.

Instead of turning their backs on Trump in anger and frustration, friends of the US should engage the president with hopes of curbing his destructive instincts. Trump will do more damage if he feels isolated, rejected and cut loose, while holding him close provides at least some leverage over his behavior and may impress upon him that partnership has its advantages. Moreover, the Trump presidency will not last forever. Trying to keep Washington tethered to the international community during his tenure will make it easier to repair the wreckage he leaves behind.

Learning to live with the Trump presidency means accepting the harsh reality that what you see is what you get. Indeed, his presidency is likely to get worse, not better, in the months ahead. The adults in the room – John Kelley, Rex Tillerson, H.R. McMaster, James Mattis – are unable to tame Trump, and some of them may well jump ship in the near future, eliminating whatever moderating influence they may exercise. Trump is also likely to ramp up his hard-edged populism as the mid-term elections draw near. With the Democrats poised to do well in November, Trump will seek to rally his base by doubling down on his nationalist and populist agenda.

Having alienated the more centrist voters who helped him win the presidency, Trump is retreating to his faithful base, which at least for now has commandeered the Republican Party. The Republican establishment is running for cover in the face of a mobilized and angry base. Whether he likes it or not, Trump is beholden to an ascendant insurgency of

populist nationalists; he has already lost much of the rest of the country.

Trump has gravitated to the far right by inclination as much as by necessity. Even as Steve Bannon, Sebastian Gorka and other fervent ideologues have been banished from the White House, Trump’s racially tinged brand of nationalism has continued, if not deepened. His equivocation over neo-Nazi protesters in Charlottesville, his insults toward Hispanic immigrants, his decision to send back Haitians, Salvadorans and others who came to the United States to escape conflict and natural disaster, his disparaging comments about Africa – this is the real Donald Trump, not a political concoction of his handlers.

Confronted with this sobering reality, how should the international community handle the remainder of Trump’s tumultuous presidency?

TO WALK AWAY FROM TRUMP IS TO ENCOURAGE HIS WORST INSTINCTS

First, America’s partners should continue to try to connect with Trump, seeking to exercise whatever influence they may have over his behavior. Trump craves respect and acceptance; shunning and isolating him will only make matters worse. Moreover, engagement indeed has the potential to yield concrete payoffs. Even when Trump appears ready to start dismantling policies he does not like, he tends to offer an escape hatch.

Rather than simply dismantling the Iran deal, he handed it over to Congress to address his concerns. He announced the end of the program allowing Dreamers (residents who entered or remained in the country illegally as minors) to stay in the US, but then opened a dialogue with Democrats about preserving it. He declared he was rescinding health care subsidies needed to fund Obamacare, but soon thereafter entertained a bipartisan proposal to salvage the funding. Even though Trump has announced his intention to withdraw from the Paris climate agreement, the US cannot formally exit the accord until 2020, leaving room to maneuver.

It is difficult to know whether Trump’s stop-and-go style is a sign of genetic inconstancy or part of a shrewd negotiating strategy. But it does mean that the door is open to negotiation, and concerned parties should walk through that door. In the end, Trump may or may not uphold the Iran deal, allow Dreamers to stay in the US, preserve the health insurance of Americans in need or return to the Paris Agreement. Nonetheless, it is certainly worth trying to bring him around. To walk away from Trump is to encourage his worst instincts.

Second, engaging Trump does not mean bending to his wishes; it means attempting to bring him around to sensible positions, and standing one’s ground when that effort fails. On the Iran nuclear deal, America’s partners must staunchly defend the pact, come what may; it is the only game in town. How-

change and trade. But in the meantime, the rest of the world is right to stand by the Paris climate agreement, even though Trump has renounced it. The same goes for the Trans-Pacific Partnership; its remaining members are doing the right thing by proceeding with a trade deal despite Trump’s withdrawal from the pact. If Trump seeks to back away from the World Trade Organization, it will be up to other members to defend a rules-based trading order.

While engaging Trump, America’s partners, and Europe in particular, must prevent him from dismantling the liberal norms and rules-based institutions that have long anchored the West. Europe should make sure that the next US president does not assume office in a Western world that has been reduced to rubble.

Third, America’s friends must prevent popular opposition to Trump from transforming into anti-American sentiment. Even if anger toward Trump may be understandable, and even if politicians are tempted to cater to it, doing so risks setting democratic societies against the US. If leaders around the world are to remain committed to working with Trump whenever possible – as well as reaching out to the US bureaucracy, Congress, and state and local officials, all of which may be better partners than the White House – they must ensure that their own electorates have not come to write off the US.

Otherwise, any hope of sustaining a sense of solidarity and community among the Atlantic democracies will prove illusory. Otherwise, the US president following Trump may preside over a country that has turned sharply inward and lost its internationalist calling.

The United States, long the anchor of republican ideals and multilateralism, is backing away from both under Trump’s leadership. This turn in US politics is part of a broader surge in illiberalism and populist nationalism playing out in many quarters of the globe.

To help ensure that we are witnessing only a temporary setback – not a permanent reversal – in the fortunes of liberal politics, America’s partners should keep reaching out to Trump and resist the temptation to distance themselves from the US. Engaging Trump will limit the damage he can do, and make it more likely that the Trump era represents a dark detour for Americans – and not the new normal.

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