



Destroying the Foundations of U.S. Foreign Policy

By Kelly Magsamen and Michael Fuchs June 28, 2018

In the span of just a few days in June, President Donald Trump became the first U.S. president to refuse to sign onto a statement of the G-7 leaders as well as the first sitting American president to meet with a North Korean leader. These two encounters have shaken the foundations of U.S. foreign policy and may irreversibly damage America's security and prosperity. Specifically, they have signaled that the United States under Trump will disregard its closest allies and embrace the world's most brutal dictators.

For months, President Trump has chipped away at America's role as a global leader. He has withdrawn the United States from both the Iran nuclear deal and the Paris climate agreement and has praised dictators such as Kim Jong Un, to name just a few examples. However, in the past few weeks, the events of the G-7 and Singapore summits may have triggered the beginning of a fundamental break between America and the alliances and democratic values that have grounded U.S. foreign policy for decades. And in the coming weeks, there is the potential for even more damage as Trump visits Europe in July for a state visit to the United Kingdom, the NATO summit in Belgium, and a U.S.-Russia summit. In only 17 months in office, President Trump has managed to scuttle decades of hard-won U.S. global credibility and has swung open the door to China and Russia, two countries that will seize the advantage at the expense of America's security and economic interests.

Breaking alliances

America's democratic alliances are the centerpiece of U.S. foreign policy and have underpinned global stability and prosperity for decades. Allies are America's most stalwart supporters, fighting and dying alongside Americans. They stand on the front lines of some of the world's most dangerous places, from the Demilitarized Zone of the Korean Peninsula to the eastern edges of Europe, where Russia is once again threatening regional peace. And despite Trump's accusation that allies are ripping off America, they are a bargain for the American people: Allies are force multipliers for American power, projecting America's reach across the globe and supporting American policy goals—not to mention that U.S. allies share the costs of stationing American troops.¹

Most Americans recognize the value of alliances and are unhappy about Trump's mistreatment of America's best friends. A recent CNN/SSRS poll revealed that 63 percent of Americans believe that "maintaining good relations with countries that have been close allies of the U.S. for many years" is more important than "imposing tariffs on imports from foreign countries to protect certain U.S. industries."² Only 23 percent of Americans supported the tariffs over allies, according to the same poll.³

But it is clear that Trump does not care. He has long criticized Europe for supposedly ripping off America on trade and defense spending, and he openly supports right-wing populist movements seeking to upend a democratic Europe. He has criticized Germany for its willingness to accept refugees.⁴ In June 2017, while in Poland, Trump highlighted a xenophobic goal of defending the West from "forces ... inside or out" that threaten the "bonds of culture, faith and tradition that make us who we are."⁵ On the campaign trail, he called for the United Kingdom to leave the European Union. As president, he publicly supported the right-wing opponent of then-candidate Emmanuel Macron during France's 2017 presidential election.⁶

At the beginning of his presidency, Trump and allies tried to get along. Following usual protocol, European leaders came to the Oval Office for photo-ops with the new U.S. president. And while Trump continued to take jabs at allies on trade, defense spending, and migration, it looked possible for the alliance to weather the storms.

However, after the 2018 G-7 summit, that appears less likely. Trump first agreed to sign the G-7 joint statement, only to withdraw his support via tweet on his way out of Canada. That unleashed a torrent of criticism of G-7 allies from Trump and his administration, including from Trump's trade adviser Peter Navarro, who said of Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau: "There's a special place in hell for any foreign leader that engages in bad-faith diplomacy with President Donald J. Trump and then tries to stab him in the back on the way out the door."⁷

U.S. allies are losing patience. As Trudeau said at the end of the G-7 summit: "Canadians, we're polite, we're reasonable, but we also will not be pushed around."⁸ German Ambassador to the United States Peter Wittig declared, "The US government is saying goodbye to the post-war tradition of the West as a community of like-minded nations."⁹

As Trump trashes democratic allies—and the United States imposes tariffs on Europe, Canada, and Japan, which could start a trade war with America's closest friends—the transatlantic alliance may be entering an unprecedented period of strain. As German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas said, "the Atlantic has become wider under President Trump."¹⁰ This trend risks playing right into Russian President Vladimir Putin's strategy of weakening democratic Europe and inducing doubt in U.S. alliances.

Similar shifts may be occurring within America's alliances in Asia. During his press conference immediately following the summit with Kim Jong Un, Trump announced—to the surprise of his South Korean allies—that he would be canceling U.S. military exercises with South Korea. He even went further to call those exercises "provocative,"

which is how North Korea describes them.¹¹ While South Korean President Moon Jae-in supports U.S.-North Korea diplomacy, that support is driven in part by fear of Trump's derision for the alliance. Moon recognizes that South Korea has a new interest in reducing tensions with North Korea, namely the unreliability of the United States under Trump to defend South Korea. While stopping military exercises could help to lower tensions, it seems, at the very least, likely to weaken the U.S.-South Korea alliance, which, in turn, will make any policy on North Korea less effective.

Japan, too, is concerned about Trump's direction. After a year and a half of Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's attempts to court Trump, Abe is realizing that he has nothing to show for it. Trump is hitting Japan with tariffs and moving ahead on North Korea without Japan, leaving Japan vulnerable vis-a-vis North Korea in the near term and China in the long term.

Abandoning democratic values

While alliances are the bedrock of U.S. and global security, democratic values have long been the moral compass of U.S. foreign policy. Trump is abandoning these values at an accelerated pace. At home, he makes clear that he does not value the laws and norms that have made America a role model of democracy around the world; his policy of forcibly separating the children of immigrants at the border and his attacks on the judiciary, free press, and law enforcement are but a few examples.

Most strikingly, President Trump has picked fights with America's closest democratic allies and embraced the leaders of some of the world's most autocratic countries. Trump openly envies the unconstrained power of autocrats, praising Vladimir Putin of Russia, Xi Jinping of China, and Kim Jong Un of North Korea.¹² As Trump said of Kim, who rules over a totalitarian dictatorship in which over 100,000 political prisoners are imprisoned in labor camps: "He speaks and his people sit up at attention ... I want my people to do the same."¹³

U.S. power relies on much more than economic and military might. America's ability to achieve its national security goals depends on the world perceiving it as a different kind of leader, a country that has both the power and the will to do good in the world. Trump, however, has unilaterally disarmed America of its most powerful foreign policy tool in exchange for being considered one of the cool kids by the world's worst bullies.

What's next, appeasement of Russia?

Next up on Trump's agenda may be appeasement of Russia. President Trump's admiration for Russian President Putin is well-known. Trump's campaign colluded with Russia to gain its help in winning the 2016 presidential campaign; and since taking office, Trump has tried to explain away Russia's aggression in Europe and its interference in

American politics. Parroting talking points that could have been written in the Kremlin, Trump justified Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea from neighboring Ukraine and called for Russia to be readmitted to the G-7.¹⁴ Trump has long argued that he wants America to have a better relationship with Russia, which is a reasonable goal, but, in achieving that goal, he appears willing to ignore the ongoing threats that Russia poses to U.S. and international security.

In the coming weeks, President Trump may have another opportunity to sell out American interests to Putin. As Trump prepares to visit the United Kingdom on July 13 and attend the NATO summit scheduled for July 11-12, he will carve out time to meet Putin as well.¹⁵ With the disaster of the G-7 fresh in the minds of Trump and European leaders, Trump may use the NATO summit as an opportunity to display his anger with European allies and, in the process, further undermine the alliance. The massive Trump protests, which are expected during his visit to the United Kingdom, will reinforce a break in the U.S.-U.K. "special relationship."

Flying to see Putin alongside the NATO summit could very well be Trump's "Munich moment." While Trump has repeatedly helped Russia by undermining NATO and the EU, some of his attempts to appease Russia have been constrained by others. For example, Congress overwhelmingly approved sanctions on Russia for its interference in the 2016 election—over Trump's objections.¹⁶

However, of late, Trump appears more inclined to follow his instincts, and his admiration for Putin could drive him to sell out American interests in July. If a Trump-Putin meeting results in the United States continuing to overlook Russia's ongoing invasion of Ukraine, its stoking of conflict in Syria, and its ongoing attempts to interfere with American elections—including this year's midterm elections—it could result in lasting damage to U.S. national security interests.

Consequences

When it comes to foreign policy, successes and failures can materialize slowly. It can take months or years to damage alliances and sometimes even longer to witness the tangible fallout of those broken relationships. However, it is clear that President Trump is speeding toward a scenario in which our allies will not trust us and our adversaries will not fear us.

In the short run, the consequences of Trump's policies may very well embroil America in trade wars that hurt the pocketbooks of Americans. In response to Trump's tariffs, Europe and Canada are already initiating tariffs against American goods, which could cost Americans jobs, lower wages, increase the costs of goods, and slow exports from U.S. companies.¹⁷ For example, Harley-Davidson has announced that it will be moving some of its production to Europe in order to avoid retaliatory tariffs imposed by Europe in response to Trump's tariffs.¹⁸

French President Macron has already made clear that Europe is willing to go its own way, as it did at the G-7: “The American President may not mind being isolated, but neither do we mind signing a 6 country agreement if need be. Because these 6 countries represent values, they represent an economic market which has the weight of history behind it and which is now a true international force.”¹⁹ The ongoing discussions between Iran; the United Kingdom, Germany, France, China, Russia (P4+1); and the EU to keep the Iran nuclear deal alive without the United States are a clear result of Europe working with China, Russia, and Iran to mitigate damage done by the United States.²⁰

Expect more of this to come. Pushing allies away could sap popular support in allied countries to assist American efforts to take on national security challenges in Afghanistan, the Middle East and North Korea. After the attacks of 9/11, Europe invoked Article 5 of the NATO charter, claiming that an attack on America was an attack on all members; and NATO responded by joining the United States in war in Afghanistan. The next time America is attacked, Europe may not respond in the same way.

While it takes a lot to break an alliance, if the United States does not change course, it risks isolating itself and undermining its alliances to the point where its allies will think that it is the problem.

In the wake of the debacle at the G-7 summit, German Foreign Minister Maas signaled that Europe may already be heading in this direction. In his speech following the summit, Maas listed “Donald Trump’s egotistic policy of ‘America First’ ” as one of the three main challenges to Europe, alongside Russian aggression and Chinese expansionism. Maas recommended that Europe adopt policies to push back against Trump’s America, saying, “our common response to ‘America First’ today must be ‘Europe United’... forming an assertive European counterweight when the US crosses a red line.”²¹

One can imagine policymakers in the capitals of U.S. allies asking themselves: Can we trust America? Do we need to begin hedging against America by cutting deals with China and Russia?

Today, these questions may still seem extreme. However, in calling for a European strategy against the United States, the German foreign minister himself noted, “the fact that a German Foreign Minister has to say this is something that, to be honest, I wouldn’t have thought possible.”²²

Yet it is possible. It is often said that “you don’t know what you’ve got until it’s gone.” America may be about to find out exactly what it has lost if it does not get back on track by working closely with its allies and upholding its democratic values.

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