

Section: Analysis

Trump: Apprentice-President, Failing Entertainer, or Disrupter-in-Chief?

Three possible pathways for Trump's foreign policy

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America's Secretary of Defense James Mattis made his first trip to Europe in February to discuss plans to fight against Islamic terrorism in the Middle East, plans that Trump demanded the Pentagon devise within 30 days. While European defense chiefs certainly engaged with the former general on his recommendations to the White House, they also let it be known that their primary topic of discussion in Brussels and at the subsequent Munich Security Conference was the future of transatlantic relations and the state of European Union cooperation in security and defense. America's close European allies are anxious about the Trump administration's commitment to Europe, NATO and the liberal international world order that the U.S. created after the Second World War. Are they right to be concerned? This article outlines three possible pathways for the future of U.S. foreign policy and considers which course of action might be the most dangerous for the future of European security.

Trump's own views on foreign policy are difficult to assess because his administration has not yet enunciated a defined strategy. His one major foreign policy speech during the election was largely full of campaign red meat to satisfy his core supporters. Nevertheless, a careful look of the administration's announcements along with a close scrutiny of the conduct of the Trump White House yields some evidence for three possible future pathways. The first of which is the most positive for European allies.

The dissonance of the message will end

In this first option, the first few chaotic months of the Trump policy making machine will be ironed out and the dissonance of the White House's message becomes a short-term aberration. At the moment, both the Departments for Defense and State are operating with minimum staff meaning that really only 6-7 highly empowered people in the White House are making most of the decisions. To complicate matters, these 6-7 individuals do not have much government experience. For example, one of Trump's senior foreign policy advisers, his son-in-law Jared Kushner, has no meaningful foreign or defense expertise or experience relevant to his current position. But, once the Trump administration gets people into office, with Senate confirmed posts being gradually approved, a conventional Republican foreign policy will emerge. Happily, there is some proof that a more standard foreign policy is currently being crafted, in particular, by Defense Secretary Mattis, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and National Security Adviser (NSA) Lt. Gen. H.R. McMaster.

Indeed, in picking Mattis Trump chose a former NATO Supreme Allied Commander Transformation, a former chief of the U.S. Joint Forces Command and one of the U.S. military's leading intellectuals. While foreign policy specialists would like to believe that such an appointment, made by the most un-intellectual president in perhaps American

history, was designed in part to make up for Trump's own gaps in military knowledge, it is more likely that Mattis' selection was accidental. Trump boasted that his reasons for choosing Mattis were related to his nicknames "Mad Dog" and the "Warrior Monk," the latter emerging from the fact that the former general is well-read (many have noted his library of 7,000 books). But Mattis was also an able, clever commander in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars and, more importantly for Europeans, he has shown a clear-eyed understanding of the importance of preserving America's alliances and defending the American-led international order. Additionally, to the contrary of his president, Mattis has said that he does not like torture and believes in diplomacy. Even Senator Elizabeth Warren, who said "We're counting on you," during Mattis' confirmation hearings, sees the general as part of the defense against an unsound, dangerous Trumpian foreign policy.¹

The belief that he might act as a brake on a more radically transformative Trump foreign policy was further exemplified by statements that Mattis made about NATO and threats emanating from Russia in those same confirmation hearings. For instance, Mattis voiced strong support for NATO, said that he did not think it was a problem that some members did not spend much on their own defense and he called Putin an adversary in key areas, who is trying to break the North Atlantic alliance.

Complementing the moderating role that Mattis might bring to U.S. foreign policy is the reality of what NATO is actually doing on the ground in the territory of European partners. The reality is that thousands of NATO troops and dozens of tanks are currently settling into position in the alliance's Eastern member states. Moreover, NATO officials are confident that these recent deployments are there to stay. The actuality of recent NATO force increases has resulted in Russian officials using provocative language to express their concerns. For example, Deputy Foreign Minister Alexei Meshkov said the deployment of NATO troop to the Baltics was a threat to Russia and that it was "the first time since World War Two we see German soldiers along our borders."²

Trump is trainable

There are also signs that the fantasy entertained by those Republicans who supported Trump's campaign to become president might come true — that he is learning from his mistakes and that he is trainable. For example, rather than risk a hostile conversation with Chinese President Xi Jinping (as happened with Australia Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull on February 2nd), Trump sent Xi a letter that expressed a desire to form a "constructive relationship" with China. And then later when Trump did make a phone call with Xi on the 10th of February, he went back on his earlier prevarications and fully committed to honoring the *One China* policy. To emphasize a more reassuring Asian policy, Trump also sent Mattis on his first overseas trip to South Korea (to reassure top officials that America is committed to their defense as well as committed to deploying the THAAD missile system) and Japan (where he said an attack on the Senkaku Islands would be considered an attack on the U.S., as stipulated in 1960 Security Treaty).

There are also signs that Trump's staff can see that he is struggling with making the transition from businessman to Head of State and Government and are, as a consequence, making changes in the way the White House works. As a case in point, both Trump and his staff were frustrated by the bungled rollout of his policies, the backlash these policies then

received and the resulting historically low approval ratings for his presidency. There are reports that Trump was upset and angry after he learned more of the details of the first immigration ban that he signed.

Trump was also distressed when he learned about the ramifications of the Executive Order he signed that elevated White House strategist Steve Bannon to a full seat on the Principals' Committee of the National Security Council (NSC) while at the same time demoting the roles of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Director of National Intelligence (DNI). Realizing that he must know more about what he signs, Trump requested Chief of Staff Reince Priebus to put in effect a much more conventional White House protocol and, moreover, designated that he will now be a part of the drafting process of Executive Orders.³ Priebus also created a 10-point checklist that must be adhered to before the release of any new initiatives. This new procedure might be why in early April, Trump reversed his order on the composition of the NSC, reinstalling the DNI and the Joint Chiefs while at the same time removing Bannon.

In this first pathway, the world needs to give this very neophyte administration more time to sort out the details and the process of making America foreign policy. Rather than become overly anxious, Americans and allies alike should follow Kellyanne Conway's advice about Trump: don't listen to what is coming out of his mouth; listen to his heart.⁴

Trump the entertainer is out of his depth

But, no matter how much the world may want Kellyanne to be right, it is hard to ignore much of Trump's campaign rhetoric (especially since he has not stopped campaigning) and his persistent tweeting. Both of which have sown doubt about America's continued commitment to a liberal order and to America's allies. Perhaps channeling his last job as an entertainer, he is merely play-acting the role of president because he does not possess the knowledge and skill normally associated with the job.

Unfortunately, there is plenty of evidence that Trump the entertainer is out of his depth. First, even though Trump says it is a fine-working machine, the reality of the White House's conduct points to a muddled and chaotic organization. Second, his outsider's lack of understanding of the checks and balances of liberal democracy is all too clear through, for example, his disrespect for the judiciary and the media. Third, beyond appealing to his base, he has little understanding of how to unite the country and reach out to groups that opposed his candidacy. Just weeks into his presidency, he already alienated numerous groups, including much of Silicon Valley and elements of the agricultural and industrial sectors, who are threatened by his administration's broadsides on immigration and free trade.

Fourth, while Trump may have picked some able people to fill his administration, he is at the same time hogtying them. The White House already had disagreements with Mattis, Tillerson and McMaster on deputy positions, with Mattis reportedly angered that the White House selected a candidate for the job of Army Secretary without consulting him. Mattis and the White House also tussled over who would fill the undersecretary of defense for policy post, with the White House twice objecting to Mattis' picks.

In Tillerson's case, the White House barely consulted, if at all, the State Department before holding phone calls with foreign leaders or while drafting the initial travel ban. The White House also rejected Tillerson's request to appoint Elliott Abrams as his deputy secretary. More generally, it seems that Trump wants to diminish the State Department's role considerably by, for example, cutting its budget by a third and firing long-term career staff. It is not clear what Tillerson thinks about the evisceration of his own department. To date, he has not commented about it and, moreover, the fact that he has not said much at all about foreign policy suggests that he is in agreement with the prospect of a neutered State Department.

While the White House rejected Mattis' and Tillerson's choices for key staff in their respective departments, the administration took a different direction to impede the new, well-respected NSC Director, General McMaster: they have largely refused his requests to fire his predecessor's staff picks. Upon taking office, McMaster discovered that while he may overhaul the NSC to some extent, he must rely on people in many cases recruited by the former NSA and other Trump loyalists.

Trump the Man

A fifth indication that Trump may not be up to scratch is revealed by an honest look at Trump's track record as a businessman. As Dani K. Nedal and Daniel H. Nexon in *Foreign Affairs* point out, he was born into wealth, was bailed out multiple times by his father and has a string of failures behind him. Despite this, he "somehow still attributes his success to his own abilities rather than to his considerable structural advantages."⁵ In the realm of foreign policy this misplaced belief means that Trump trusts his own rhetoric of being a superior dealmaker. He thinks that if he pushes other states, they will submit rather than pursue their own interests. Nedal and Nexon further point out that Trump believes that he is smarter and a better negotiator than past American presidents, who had the luxury of negotiating on the basis of a more powerful America relative to others on the international stage. It takes a "rather naïve negotiator to attempt to overhaul relatively favorable deals from a position of comparative weakness."⁶

Finally, as an individual, Trump is not only naïve and uninformed of the workings of his office, but he appears to be a slow learner. He has made it clear that he does not want anything similar to the briefings that presidents routinely receive nor does he want to read anything longer than one page. To complicate matters further, he has problems with impulse control, leading to a tendency of going dangerously off script, such as when he berated a close ally like Australia and recklessly accused Obama of illegally eavesdropping on Trump Tower during the election campaign. One of the few constants of the presidency so far is a tendency to tweet rancorous response to events that run counter to his wishes. The pattern has been to tweet alarming allegations soon after the morning news, often as a specific response to what is on *Fox and Friends*. Trump tweets his accusations before making any verifications, perhaps forgetting that he has direct access to the most extensive intelligence community on the planet. Although, the fact that Trump is waging a twitter war against U.S. intelligence agencies, likening them to Nazis for their role in publicizing a dossier linking his campaign to Russian intelligence, may explain his reticence to reach out to the spy services.

Clearly the Trump White House operates outside the realm of normal presidential behavior. It could mean that the world must learn how to deal with a showman in the role of his lifetime. In this case, allies must hope his naivety and ignorance can be restrained for the next two to four years. Such prospects are unpleasant but still preferable to the final pathway. If the dissonance continues, allies must contemplate a third gloomier scenario: that Trump really wants to be a disruptive president.

Destroy the Washington foreign policy establishment

In the third pathway, the goal of the Trump White House is maximum disruption for American foreign policy, with Trump essentially wanting what White House strategist Steve Bannon wants; namely, an economic protectionist and nationalist America. Regrettably, there is plenty of evidence that this might be the case.

A prominent piece of support for this pathway is Trump's inauguration speech, written by Bannon and Stephen Miller, a senior White House policy adviser. Miller, who previously worked both for Minnesota Representative and presidential contender Michele Bachmann and Alabama Senator Jeff Sessions, also played a key role in drafting Trump's first Executive Order on immigration. While Miller and Bannon may have written the speech, Trump himself conveyed the strong nationalist message to the nation, thereby giving a robust indication that Trump shares their worldviews. Trump has said that he respects Bannon *because* he has a clear vision and "because he is independently wealthy and therefore does not need the job."⁷ Combine these statements with the fact that Trump elevated Bannon to a full seat on the Principals' Committee of the NSC and one can conclude that Trump trusts Bannon bigly (to use a Trumpian adverb). And despite Trump's anger about his administration's poor performance — and that Bannon's fingerprints were all over the policies with the most backlash — Bannon is still the president's dominant adviser with walk-in admittance to the Oval Office.

Trump may also agree with Bannon's goal to destroy the Washington foreign policy establishment. In the past, Bannon espoused a philosophy that aimed to bring the institutions of the state crashing down in order to trigger the birth of a new political and cultural reality. In 2011, Bannon also boasted that he liked to overwhelm his audience, for example, in his approach to documentary filmmaking. In line with this kind of thinking, Bannon wanted a daily release of dramatic Executive Orders, which, of course, is exactly what happened in the first weeks. Bannon told allies that he and Stephen Miller had a brief window in which to push through their vision of economic nationalism before the Washington establishment, including the federal bureaucracy, could respond and even before members of Congress or grass roots activists could coalesce to push back.⁸ According to Joseph Nye, a Harvard professor, chaos and disarray make sense if Trump and his team are gunning for a political transformation to reshape the Republican Party and bypass the established leadership in Washington. In this strategy the tactic of tweeting to grab headlines and to punch back at critics further facilitates a disruptive environment.

What is the evidence that Trump shares Bannon's ideology? While it is hard to say that Trump holds a particular world view, one constant over the years has been that he thinks the U.S. is poorly served by the order that it built after WWII. In a 1990 interview, Trump said that U.S. allies were "openly screwing us," through unfair trade deals and their free-

riding of the costs of defense.⁹ During and after his 18 March 2017 press conference with German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Trump echoed his 1990s interview with comments that allies “owe” the U.S. money for the “powerful, and very expensive, defense it provides.”¹⁰

What does all this mean for Europe?

In the first scenario, reason prevails and the president does not listen to his more radical advisers. Although reforms and adjustments will be inevitable, with allies penitently increasing their military spending as well as their levels of force commitment. In this pathway, Trump also moves to reform the international system of alliances that the U.S. has built since the end of WWII. But Mattis, Tillerson, McMaster and Vice President Mike Pence persuade Trump to honor America’s past commitments to mutual defense, including continuing support for the European Reassurance Initiative. In this first scenario, the Trump administration adheres to Mattis’ viewpoint that “nations with allies thrive and nations without allies do not.”¹¹

If the second scenario comes to fruition, the world remains confounded and confused when following and interpreting the Twitter-in-Chief. Expect more concern on the part of European allies, effectively voiced by EU Foreign Policy Chief Federica Mogherini during her visit to the U.S. in February. While at the Atlantic Council she said that it was the first time that the main focus of her trip to Washington was on bilateral relations.¹² Along with enhanced apprehension about the Transatlantic Partnership, expect, at the same time, a shrugging off of the more outrageous assertions that in the past would have caused consternation around the world. Dissecting the importance of Trumpianisms will be tricky for allies, which is why many are reading his book, *The Art of the Deal*, and the interview that he gave to *Playboy* in 1990. But, no matter how much the world acclimatizes itself to Trumpianisms that do not need to be taken seriously, America’s soft power will decline.

In the third, most disquieting scenario, Trump will most likely scrap America’s anti-missile defenses in Europe. In this more worrisome pathway, Russia may also become a potential partner for the U.S. The current plans to repeal Section 1504 of the Dodd-Frank bill is a case in point, a move that will likely lead to more corruption in the gas and oil industries and certainly help Russia over the long term in an understated way. Although Moscow and Washington may currently disagree over what to do about Bashar al Assad in Syria, Trump’s infatuation with global strongmen is a recurring theme in his public statements (he has at different times for a variety of reasons praised Saddam Hussein, Kim Jong Un, Muammar Gaddafi and even Assad). Trump’s comments suggesting that the U.S. is as murderous as Russia certainly point to a goal to please Putin.

A realization of the third scenario would further undermine the European Union. Trump not only openly praised BREXIT but he is also purportedly considering appointing Ted Malloch, who in the past likened the EU to the Soviet Union, to be the U.S. Ambassador to the EU.¹³ Along with not caring if the EU survives, some Trump advisers, like Bannon, embrace leaders such as Marine Le Pen as natural Trump allies because they are part of a global revolt by nationalists and traditionalists against the liberal establishment.¹⁴

Still, disruption is a risky strategy that only works if you can deliver. If Trump fails to bring jobs back to the Rust Belt in America or to coal country, if Obamacare is repealed and

something worse replaces it, if Trump sparks a trade war with China or Mexico, or even if he rekindles a real war on the Korean peninsula, then fervent support in his political base could dissolve. It is relevant to point out that the administration has not presented detailed plans on how it will conduct trade policy based on its protectionist campaign promises nor has it produced any coherent foreign policy plan, other than voicing a strategy of unpredictability. In one of his clearer statements on foreign policy in his April 2016 campaign speech Trump said, “We have to be unpredictable. And we have to be unpredictable starting now.”¹⁵

For allies, the dangers of an unpredictable foreign policy are many. However, the hazards are greater if any plans that do arrive in the Oval Office are chiefly written by Bannon. In this case, the world may give a collective shudder. As Eliot Cohen, a professor at Johns Hopkins University who served in the George W. Bush administration points out, Bannon’s writings and ideas exhibit a form of “crackpot thinking.” A former colleague of Bannon’s at *Breitbart News* echoes this analysis, stating that Bannon does not have a coherent political design, he only has “apocalyptic thinking.” Whichever pathway does take shape in the future, America’s European allies must continue to hope that cooler minds, like Mattis’ and McMaster’s, prevail at least some of the time in the White House power struggles.

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¹ Confirmation Hearing James N. Mattis to be Secretary of Defense, www.armed-services.senate.gov, page 95.

² ‘Russia calls NATO moves in Baltics, Poland and Germany a threat,’ 9 February 2017, www.reuters.com.

³ Glenn Thrush and Maggie Haberman, ‘Trump and Staff Rethink Tactics After Stumbles,’ 5 February 2017, www.nytimes.com.

⁴ Louis Nelson, ‘Conway: Judge Trump by what’s in his heart, not what comes out of his mouth,’ 9 January 2017, www.politico.com.

⁵ Dani K. Nedal and Daniel H. Nexon, ‘Trump Won’t Get the Best Deals,’ 31 January 2017, www.foreignaffairs.com.

⁶ Nedal and Nexon.

⁷ Glenn Thrush and Maggie Haberman, ‘Bannon is Given Security Role Usually Held for Generals,’ 29 January 2017, www.nytimes.com.

⁸ Glenn Thrush and Maggie Haberman, ‘Trump and Staff Rethink Tactics After Stumbles,’ 5 February 2017, www.nytimes.com.

⁹ Adam Chandler, ‘Why Foreign Leaders Read Trump’s 1990 Playboy Interview,’ 18 March 2017, www.theatlantic.com.

¹⁰ <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump>, 18 March 2017.

¹¹ Confirmation Hearing James N. Mattis to be Secretary of Defense, www.armed-services.senate.gov, page 56.

¹² A Conversation with H. E. Federica Mogherini, 10 February 2017, www.atlanticcouncil.org.

¹³ Emily Tamkin ‘At White House, Trump Campaigns While Merkel Champions Western Order,’ 17 March 2017, www.foreignpolicy.com.

¹⁴ ‘Courting Russia,’ 11 February 2017, *The Economist*, page 7.

¹⁵ ‘Transcript: Donald Trump’s Foreign Policy Speech,’ 27 April 2016, www.nytimes.com.