

#### Stability versus Flexibility in Trumpian Foreign Policy

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On 10 June 2017 newspapers record that President Donald J. Trump went out of his way during a press appearance with the president of Romania to declare that, “I’m committing the United States to Article 5,” of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) treaty.<sup>1</sup> Sighs of relief could be heard on both sides of The Pond. But as we recover from that diplomatic shock we can learn from the parallel idiocy going on the Middle East, as well as the way both sets of errors have been abetted by the administration’s foreign policy structure. The present foreign policy can be viewed usefully as a mixture of stability and flexibility. For the purposes of this discussion ‘stability’ refers to the degree of continuity between present and past American foreign policy, and ‘flexibility’ denotes the extent to which the president is able to forge an independent course in foreign policy.

So far as we can see from the outside, President Trump has complete flexibility. On issue after issue, whether it be suddenly reversing the U.S. stance regarding human rights in the Philippines, inviting the visit of the Turkish leader, or denouncing North Korea, Mr. Trump has gone his own way. The same can be said regarding some of his personal positions; for example, for years, and during his political campaigns, he roundly denounced the People’s Republic of China, then suddenly when President made Chinese leaders into best friends. Many of Trump’s policies are unstable—they are asserted without regard for pre-existing United States positions.

Conflict between stability and flexibility is about more than logic and wording. For example, with respect to the Republic of Korea (ROK) the United States’ previous stance had been that the country ought to be protected by a Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system and that, given the U.S. interest in keeping safe the thousands of American troops in the ROK, the weapons would be free. Candidate Trump made universal demands that allied countries contribute more to alliances, and the President initially declared

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Inform Raw, “Trump: ‘I’m committing the United States to Article 5.’” US News & World Report Studio, n.d., <http://video.usnews.com/Trump-Im-committing-the-United-States-to-Article-5-32533454>.

Seoul would pay for THAAD. Not only would that have had immediate implications on ROK budgets, it inserted the U.S. into South Korean politics, where the question of relations between the south and the north—and of how overt military measures may affect animosity—is a central point of debate. THAAD is also an issue in Seoul's relations with China. During a visit not long after Trump's declaration, Secretary of Defense James Mattis assured Koreans the THAAD deployment would continue as originally provided. Seoul has, since then, suspended the THAAD deployment in consideration of its relations with Beijing, but that is a different matter.

The point is that when flexibility conflicts with stability and important United States interests are at stake, the President has to be walked back. This is nowhere more evident than with the NATO mess, where in late May President Trump strutted his way through a crowd of leaders, pushing others aside, to denounce NATO allies for not meeting alliance targets for the amount of their defense spending. During that same NATO meeting Mr. Trump pointedly said nothing about Article 5, the fundamental commitment of the alliance requiring members to come to the aid of any ally that is under attack. Needless to say, 'stable' U.S. policy guarantees Article 5. It has since been reported that during preparations for Mr. Trump's trip, Secretary Mattis, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, and National Security Adviser General H. R. McMaster collaborated to make sure an affirmation of Article 5 was in the text of the speech prepared for President Trump. The absence of that declaration in Trump's delivery was deliberate and by his own hand. That amounts to total flexibility.

In the days since that conference at Brussels, General McMaster attempted damage control in a speech he made to the American Jewish Committee on June 5. The General insisted that Trump had been implicitly endorsing Article 5 by his mere presence in Brussels. Diplomacy requires more than smoke signals, however, which has led to the efforts that convinced the President to make the statement quoted at the top of this article. This was stability over flexibility, because the national interest dictates certain bedrock stances. One can only imagine the quiet efforts to educate Trump and convince him he needed to personally affirm what he had refused to say at Brussels.

All of which leads us to structure. The government has a whole series of mechanisms designed not only to ensure the stability of policy but to backstop the President, enable his foreign policy initiatives, and accent their effect by broad institutional action. The National Security Council (NSC) performs these functions at the apex of the interagency structure. Its subcommittee system provides for implementation and follow-up. The NSC staff functions to keep the President apprised of everything percolating up through the bureaucracy, of the particular matters in which he has expressed an interest, of what he *should* know before making a decision, and of international events affecting the U.S. and requiring action. The State Department furnishes the institutional memory for policy stability, the center of expertise for knowledge of foreign affairs, the muscle for diplomatic action and public outreach, and the apparatus to actually connect with foreign governments. The Department of Defense manages and maintains the military establishment, keeps the forces in the field, backstops foreign weapons sales, and provides its special expertise to government deliberations. The Central Intelligence Agency keeps the President and the government apprised of what they need to know, and carries out covert operations in support of U.S. policy.

This formidable array of institutions has been crippled in the Trump administration, both deliberately and by inadvertence. The President has barely managed to fill his ranks of Cabinet-level officials. The posts of undersecretaries, deputy secretaries, and deputy assistant secretaries—those officials with substantive knowledge of policy—are mostly vacant. Trump's operatives have been blaming Democratic opposition for this state of affairs, but in fact the administration has yet to nominate people for these slots. The State

Department has been given little to do and even told *not* to hold press conferences. These moves rob the United States of its primary instrument for articulating its policy to the world. The Pentagon is a little better off, but not much. Tillerson and Mattis have often been put in the position of firemen, extinguishing the conflagrations lit by Trump. The NSC staff is riddled with political operatives acting for their principals, and its agency-seconded staff specialists are often viewed with suspicion or challenged to prove their political loyalty.

Anna Casten Nelson termed this structure “policy hill.”<sup>2</sup> Atop it sits President Donald J. Trump. The most coherent way to picture the sequence of his actions vis-à-vis the bureaucracy is that he *wants* a loose and ineffective institutional apparatus. That affords him the widest terrain for flexibility. Mr. Trump can offer to meet with Kim Jong-un of North Korea, Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines, or Recep Erdogan of Turkey, with no genuflection to the stability of U.S. policy. Such tactics appear similar to the gambits Trump the real estate mogul might have attempted. But in the realms of foreign policy and national security—as with the NATO “Article 5” fracas—the stability of policy, and the formats and formulae of communications, have actual importance.

If Trump had broader foreign policy knowledge, a wider understanding of recent history, a better sense for the protocols of diplomacy, a deeper interest in any of these things, or a greater determination to actually master the field which he is crossing, all this would be less of a problem. Instead President Trump lacks any of those characteristics. His obsession with instant, direct communication—as in “tweeting”—complicates those characteristics even more. What Trump has is a dedication to total flexibility—and he has configured the bureaucracy to reduce its capacity either to educate him or to walk him back. Tweeting makes that worse too.

Deals are easier to make in a vacuum. The artfulness of Trump’s deals resides in rhetoric, where President Trump can assert that words mean anything he wants them to, and flexibility, with which the Chief Executive can reach beyond traditional policy and act as if there is no baggage. The bullying of Qatar is a perfect example. On his recent Middle East trip Mr. Trump encouraged Saudi Arabia to assail Qatar as a financier of terrorism.<sup>3</sup> The Saudis did just that, and enlisted a contingent of Arab states to join them in quarantining this Persian Gulf nation. The State Department could have told Mr. Trump that Qatar has been an important sponsor of initiatives in behalf of the United States, including talks with the Afghan Taliban. The Pentagon ought to have had the chance to emphasize that there are more than 10,000 American servicemembers stationed in Qatar, with two key command centers, a U.S. fleet and the airbase from which the Iraq/Syria wars are conducted. The CIA could have told Trump that a number of the identifications of terrorists the Saudis trace to Qatar are obsolete, bogus, or self-interested. Instead President Trump took an off-the-cuff decision to back a Saudi *demarche*. When Mattis and Tillerson made efforts to contain the damage, Trump took to the tweetosphere to countermand them. He’s done that twice now, the second time *after* learning he had put American military personnel at risk. At this writing the dispute is intensifying.

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<sup>2</sup> Anna Casten Nelson, “‘On Top of Policy Hill’: President Eisenhower and the National Security Council,” *Diplomatic History* 7:4 (October 1983): 307-26.

<sup>3</sup> Mark Landler, “Trump Takes Credit for Saudi Move Against Qatar, a U.S. Military Partner,” *The New York Times*, 6 June 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/06/world/middleeast/trump-qatar-saudi-arabia.html>.

The outlook is for an American foreign policy of fashion—actually the fashions that inspire Donald Trump—whether they be blind counterterrorism, friendship with Russia, or coddling Duterte. Flexibility controls. Stability will have an occasional impact on policy, primarily where so much tradition underlies a stance that changing it without review seems unthinkable. The NATO Article 5 mess shows, however, that even there problems can arise. Equally disturbing, the weakening of American institutions that Mr. Trump must accomplish in order to attain maximum flexibility will weaken the ability of U.S. diplomacy overall. The foreign policy of the United States will continue to flail and will become increasingly ineffective.

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