



“Trump is quite easy to buy off”: how Trump is putting American foreign policy up for sale

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In Donald Trump’s America, what drives foreign policy decision-making in Washington isn’t interests and values — it’s cash and ego. And other countries have noticed.

Want the US to stop criticizing your terrible human rights record? Dangle a possible trade deal. Want the Trump administration to give you a pass on the gruesome assassination of a prominent critic of your brutal regime? A few billion dollars’ worth of US arms purchases should do the trick. Need to get the American president on your side in a messy geopolitical fight? Buy some Boeing airplanes.

Those aren’t just hypothetical scenarios. They describe three very real foreign policy decisions the Trump administration made in the past year.

From China to Saudi Arabia to Qatar, Trump has either backed down or changed course on holding countries accountable for human rights abuses and other bad behaviors solely because of the money they spend — or say they’ll spend — in the United States.

In effect, Trump has put US foreign policy up for sale. “Trump is quite easy to buy off for other countries,” Emma Ashford, a US foreign policy expert at the Cato Institute, told me.

Countries know how to play Trump to get what they want

For some experts, Trump is a visceral manifestation of an ugly truth of America’s conduct in the world.

“Trump’s actions take to new, depressing heights what’s been true for a while: US foreign policy has become unmoored from strategic vision and moral purpose alike,” Stephen Wertheim, a US foreign policy historian at the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, told me. “Trump’s shtick is that the world turns on base motives, and he’s brought this ethos to foreign policy.”

But Trump is clearly the latest and greatest practitioner of this longstanding practice.

Let’s start with China. Last month, Chinese President Xi Jinping asked Trump to back off criticizing Beijing for its crackdown on pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong, according to a person familiar with the discussions. Trump accepted — because Xi made it a condition to restart sputtering trade talks between their two countries.

The Financial Times, which first reported that exchange on Wednesday, also noted that the Trump administration pressured the outgoing US consul general to Hong Kong, Kurt Tong, not to mention China's policy toward the city in his farewell speech.

Xi continues to use the trade talks as a lure to get what he wants from the American president. First, he asked that the US stay quiet on China putting more than a million Uighur Muslims in reeducation camps. Second, he pushed for Trump to reverse the ban on US businesses working with Chinese telecommunications giants Huawei and ZTE — even though Trump's own administration says doing that is a national security risk.

Asking Trump to tone it down on the Hong Kong criticism is now the third time Xi has run the same play on Trump. And each time, it seems, the president has fallen for it.

Saudi Arabia has gotten in on the game too.

Last October, Saudi dissident and Washington Post columnist Jamal Khashoggi was killed inside Saudi Arabia's consulate in Istanbul in an operation personally ordered by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the kingdom's de facto ruler.

After a week of calls from members of Congress for Trump to punish Saudi Arabia, and the crown prince himself, for the killing, Trump said he wouldn't — because the country was spending a lot of money in America.

“This took place in Turkey and to the best of our knowledge, Khashoggi is not a United States citizen,” he told reporters in the Oval Office on October 11, 2018. “I don't like stopping massive amounts of money that's being poured into our country,” referring to his desire to sell \$110 billion worth of weapons to Saudi Arabia, adding that “it would not be acceptable to me.”

Trump on possibility of punishing Saudi Arabia for apparently murdering a dissident journalist: “I don't like stopping massive amounts of money that's being poured into our country... they are spending \$110b on military equipment and on things that create jobs for this country.”

It was perhaps one of Trump's most honest articulations about how he conducts foreign policy: He won't call out a country that infringes on human dignity as long as it's willing to inject cash into the American economy. And it's especially fine if the affected people aren't US citizens. Trump, in this case, put a price tag on Khashoggi's life.

The administration did sanction 17 Saudi officials in November, and Trump has expressed his displeasure with the murder, but he refuses to publicly blame the crown prince for his orchestration.

Trump's fire sale of US foreign policy continued this week during the White House visit of Qatari Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani. It was only two years ago that Trump called Qatar a “funder of terrorism at a very high level” and effectively supported a Saudi-led diplomatic blockade of the country.

But in the Oval Office on Tuesday, Trump continued his stunning reversal on the small Gulf state, saying that he's fine with Qatar now because it wants to spend around \$85 billion on US weapons, aircraft, and more.

“They're investing very heavily in our country. They're creating a lot of jobs. They're buying tremendous amounts of military equipment, including planes,” Trump told reporters. “And

they're buying commercial planes, as you know — very large numbers of commercial planes from Boeing. And we very much appreciate it.”

This doesn't keep happening by accident — it's a deliberate strategy by other countries to manipulate the president. “A lot of foreign leaders are now relying either on flattery and pomp to woo Trump, or they come to Washington with proof of ‘big deals’ that will appeal to him in this way,” says Cato's Ashford.

“It's not so much that he's a bad negotiator, but that he's negotiating for different things than most presidents,” she continued. “He wants big wins that look good for him in the media; a promise from another country to invest in US jobs does that, even if it doesn't solve any long-term problems, and even if the investment never actually happens.”

Which means that the only thing really anyone needs to do to understand US foreign policy these days isn't to read policy documents, listen to high-profile speeches, or have an innate understanding of America's history. No, one just has to follow the money.