

Trump's Brass Knuckles Tactics toward the European Allies

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President Trump's concept of "America First" has little to do with reducing America's overgrown security commitments around the world. Knowledgeable advocates of a new foreign policy based on realism and restraint have made a compelling case that many of Washington's commitments are now obsolete or were ill-advised and counterproductive from the outset. It is not unreasonable for a government running chronic, trillion-dollar-per-year budget deficits and trying to manage multiple wars to reconsider components of its foreign policy.

But Trump's behavior does not indicate such a sober policy re-assessment. He appears quite content for America to preserve all of its existing commitments—provided other nations pay more of the financial cost and obediently embrace all of Washington's policy preferences. His periodic berating of other NATO members for an insufficient commitment to burden-sharing reflects the first demand; his pressure on those governments to adopt a more confrontational policy toward Iran and other US adversaries epitomizes the second.

The administration's criticisms about inadequate defense spending on the part of certain NATO members have become increasingly insistent and caustic. In May 2018, Trump warned that allies who failed to meet NATO's target of 2 percent of annual GDP being devoted to defense would be "dealt with," and he singled out Germany as an egregious offender. US Ambassador to Germany Richard Grenell warned Chancellor Angela Merkel in August 2019 that if her government did not boost military spending, Washington would withdraw the U.S. troops stationed in her country. At the same time, other administration officials made it clear that NATO partners who did what Washington wanted regarding financial burden-sharing could count on being rewarded. US Ambassador to Poland Georgette Mosbacher stated: "Poland meets its 2% of GDP spending obligation towards NATO. Germany does not. We would welcome American troops in Germany to come to Poland."

The mixture of US policy carrots and sticks is weighted more toward the latter with respect to demands on the European allies about Iran. Most recently, the Trump administration reportedly threatened to impose a 25% tariff on auto exports from Britain, France, and Germany, if those countries did not formally accuse Iran of breaking the 2015 multilateral nuclear deal, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), and thereby trigger that agreement's dispute mechanism. It was a cynical and outrageous demand, since the United States withdrew its compliance nearly two years ago. In retaliation, Iran gradually diluted its own compliance, but it was not until the US assassination of General Qassem Soleimani in January 2020, that Tehran announced that it was no longer bound by the JCPOA's restrictions on its nuclear program. For

Washington to insist that the European signatories act as though Iran was the party undermining the agreement was an exercise in unmitigated gall. Nevertheless, all three governments caved in response to Trump's tariff threat.

It was hardly the first time that the Trump administration demanded that its European allies tamely adopt Washington's goals and methods regarding policy toward Iran. When Britain, France, and Germany made it clear in 2018 that they would not follow the United States in re-imposing economic sanctions on Tehran, administration officials were miffed. Their anger rose when those countries and other European Union (EU) members openly sought ways they could cushion Iran from the worst effects of the US action.

US leaders continued to insist that the European signatories withdraw from the JCPOA. In April 2019, the Trump administration exacerbated already serious transatlantic frictions when it eliminated some of the boycott waivers it had granted to EU firms. Allied governments criticized that step and Washington's other moves to tighten sanctions. Nevertheless, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo made a surprise visit to Brussels in early May 2019 as EU foreign ministers met to discuss the escalating tensions about the unraveling Iran nuclear agreement. Pompeo had the temerity to drop in unannounced on a "Europeans only" meeting and try to ratchet-up US pressure on the representatives to endorse Washington's position. His posture resembled the behavior of an imperial viceroy delivering instructions to political dependents

If it's any consolation to the European powers, they are not the only democratic allies the Trump administration has bullied with respect to Iran and related issues. Iraq has especially experienced the full intensity of Washington's demand for obedience.

The US drone strike that killed General Soleimani outside Baghdad in early January was a brazen violation of Iraq's sovereignty. Carrying out the assassination on Iraqi territory when he was there at the invitation of the Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi to discuss a new regional peace feeler from Saudi Arabia, was especially arrogant, and widely resented. The killing of Soleimani (as well as two influential Iraqi militia leaders) led Iraq's parliament to pass a resolution calling on Mahdi to expel US forces stationed in the county.

Trump's reaction to the prospect that Baghdad might order US troops to leave was brutal. He threatened America's fellow democracy with harsh economic sanctions if it dared take that step. Indeed, Trump warned that "we will charge them sanctions like they've never seen before, ever. It'll make Iranian sanctions look somewhat tame." Senior officials from the Treasury Department and other agencies began drafting specific sanctions that could be imposed. Washington's explicitly warned the Iraq government that it could lose access to its account held at the Federal Reserve Bank of New York. Such a freeze would amount to financial strangulation of the country's already fragile economy. The US-held account, which consists primarily of Iraq's oil revenues, represents nearly 90% of the government's budget.

Faced with such potentially dire consequences, Mahdi (who is serving as a caretaker prime minister) stated that he would leave any decision about the status of US troops to the next government. His retreat averted an immediate bilateral crisis (and Iraq's likely humiliation), but it did so at great cost to America's reputation for fair dealing.

If the United States is going to retain its vast global network of allies (or even a reduced version of that network), it will need to temper its demands and treat those allies with a modicum of respect. Throughout the Cold War, US leaders proudly proclaimed that NATO and other US-led alliances were voluntary associations of sovereign nations. Conversely, the Warsaw Pact alliance of Eastern European countries was a blatantly imperial enterprise of puppet regimes under the Kremlin's total domination.

That distinction between the rival geopolitical blocs was generally valid. Although the United States occasionally exerted pressure on its allies when they opposed US objectives, Washington did not treat democratic partners as lackeys to be ordered about. However, such restraint seems to be disappearing. The Trump administration's mean-spirited arrogance is most evident in its conduct toward Iraq, but the threat to impose punitive tariffs on key European allies unless they complied with US demands regarding Iran policy is not far behind. By engaging in such heavy-handed behavior, the United States risks being seen as the new evil empire.

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