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Petulance as Foreign Policy

Conor Friedersdorf

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Donald Trump began his presidency with a phone call to Australia that he used to complain about a deal made by his predecessor rather than trying to advance U.S. foreign policy. He won zero concessions while alienating a staunch ally.

Observers could only hope that over time his interactions on the world stage would be shaped by America's interests more than his interest in being petulant. But almost a year later, he is openly showing the world that same petulant face.

At around 11 p.m. Thursday, having already dominated the day's headlines for the needless diplomatic own-goal of declaring that various foreign countries are "shitholes," President Trump posted the following message to his Twitter account:

Reason I canceled my trip to London is that I am not a big fan of the Obama Administration having sold perhaps the best located and finest embassy in London for "peanuts," only to build a new one in an off location for 1.2 billion dollars. Bad deal. Wanted me to cut ribbon-NO!

A lot of factors determine whether a president ought to take an overseas trip: whether he is needed in Washington; the diplomatic goals that he expects to accomplish; whether travel to a particular location is safe; and on and on and on. But in Trump's telling, he isn't canceling a visit to one of America's closest allies for any of those reasons, or any metric tied to whether the visit would help America.

He's projecting the image of a man canceling out of umbrage—a man who disagrees with a done deal and intends to make a show of it without trying to reverse it. "Is he **bragging** about adopting petulance as an IR strategy?" Julian Sanchez of the libertarian Cato Institute asked on Twitter. "Is the whole staff really so cowed nobody will tell him how small and petty this makes him sound?"

And Trump's Twitter tantrum elides that the Bush administration initiated the relocation of the American embassy in London. They announced it in 2008. Among informed Brits, he thus looks to be not only petulant, but under-informed—or a liar who is afraid of facing protests expected to coincide with his visit.

Whether his tweet was premeditated or another instance of erratic, spontaneous outburst, it is hard to imagine any of the men or women Trump ran against in the 2016 primaries or the general election handling this matter as poorly.