



His own worst enemy

Doug Bandow

July 25, 2018

If American foreign policy was a reality show, Donald Trump would have turned it into television's highest rated program. But when he acts as president, the consequences are real. Washington's policies have a disproportionate effect on the entire world.

Unfortunately, the president's almost weekly train wrecks obscure criticisms that frequently are reasonable, even far-sighted. For instance, President Trump's insistence that other nations do more is long overdue. Similarly, his willingness to break protocol and meet foreign leaders formerly seen as untouchable puts America's interest before foolish tradition.

Such was the case with his recent trip to Europe.

The president raised serious issues. For instance, he is quite right that NATO members long have taken advantage of America. Although Washington initially had to carry most of Europe's load after World War II, that ceased to be the case decades ago.

Despite the presumed threat posed by the Evil Empire, as Ronald Reagan called the Soviets and their satellites, the Europeans routinely failed to keep their promises to spend more. During the Cold War Washington might have decided that it had to defend its irresponsible clients to prevent Soviet domination of Eurasia. But no longer.

Today the Europeans believe that either they face no serious threat or America will continue to protect them. The result is the same in both cases: they take a free, or at least cheap, ride on America. With the United States essentially bankrupt — running trillion-dollar annual deficits and facing \$200-trillion-plus in unfunded liabilities — what amounts to defense welfare no longer is affordable. It is time to tell them, "No More!"

As for the United Kingdom, the form of Brexit obviously will determine how fast and far London and Washington can go in forging a bilateral free-trade agreement. Geography alone makes the U.K.'s economic ties to Europe vital. However, to the extent that the British government hopes to replace continental business with American commerce, London will have to craft Brexit carefully.

Finally, the United States and Russia appear to be heading into a new Cold War. That is foolish for both sides.

Although Vladimir Putin is no friend of America, there is no evidence that he views Washington as a necessary enemy. Like a modern tsar, he wants respect and secure borders.

Unfortunately, the United States has done much to treat Moscow as an adversary: It ignored pledges to Soviet and Russian leaders not to expand NATO to Russia's new borders; it lawlessly dismantled traditional Russian ally Serbia; and it promoted revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine against governments friendly to Moscow. Moreover, Washington's international behavior is consistently aggressive, intervening in scores of other nations' elections (including Russia's in 1996) and routinely bombing, invading and occupying other states, including Syria, a traditional Russian ally.

These actions help explain, though not justify, Putin's annexation of Crimea and support for Ukrainian separatists. Moreover, the latter response, though ugly, threatens no vital U.S. interests. Which suggests a deal is possible: perhaps end NATO expansion in return for Russian withdrawal from the Donbas. The West should accept though not recognize Crimea as part of Russia: the former won't return to Ukraine short of war.

Yet the president did his own cause no good when he seemed to go out of his way to insult not just his hosts, but almost every foreign official he met. He trashed the Europeans and insisted that they spend 4 percent of GDP on the military, more than America.

He dumped on U.K. Prime Minister Theresa May's Brexit stance while endorsing departing Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson for her job. The president then flipped to lavish praise upon May, who survives mostly because the Tories fear an all-out leadership battle.

Finally, his complimentary, even obsequious stance toward Putin undermined his case for making a hard-nosed deal to advance America's interest. Even Republicans trashed his reluctance to accept the judgment of U.S. intelligence agencies on Russian interference with America's election, a genuinely vital American interest. Had he drawn a red line there, he could have better advocated concessions elsewhere.

The president is his own worst enemy. Despite his oft-confrontational rhetoric, he is willing to use diplomacy to advance America's ends. Equally important, he appears to recognize that America's traditional foreign policy consensus too often has led to horrid, bloody failure.

Yet he seems unable to take the responsible steps necessary to turn his views into policy. As a result, he discredits otherwise sound arguments on the need to transform American foreign policy.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute. A former special assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is author of "Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire." He wrote this for InsideSources.com.