



US Allies Should Back President Trump

by Prof. Hillel Frisch

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Donald J. Trump is facing unprecedented criticism one year into his term as president of the world's greatest power. The allies of the US can assist him by making clear how much he has advanced American foreign affairs interests.

It is not the business of allies to meddle in the domestic affairs of the US, and certainly not to take a position in domestic controversies over the performance of its leaders and politicians. It is the role of the vibrant democratic process in the US to handle such matters.

What is of utmost importance, however, is for allies to make known to American citizens how they see the US president advancing what they perceive to be the foreign affairs interests of the US.

Most if not all US allies – with the possible exception of some in the EU – agree that President Trump and his team, Secretary of State Tillerson and Secretary of Defense Mattis, have made the world a safer place in Trump's first year in office than it was under his predecessor, Barack Obama. It is safer because Washington's many allies, which, together with the US, easily amount to the greatest aggregation of power in the world today, are more assured of American resolve to lead.

Heading the list would no doubt be the important allies of the US in Asia – Japan, South Korea, Australia, India, Vietnam, and Singapore, who appreciate Trump's tough rhetoric towards North Korea and US assertiveness in maintaining the freedom of the seas in hotspots such as the South China Sea. Trump's fiery rhetoric contraposed against Tillerson's and Mattis's more measured responses make for an effective political symphony that blends resolve with prudence.

EU member states in central and eastern Europe feel the same way. For Poland, the Czech Republic, and even more so, the Baltic states and Ukraine, the initial worries emanating from President Trump's relations with Putin before the assumption of the presidency, Tillerson's oil dealings with Russia as an energy business executive, and Trump's critical views of NATO, dissipated as the US under Trump fulfilled its obligations made by the previous administration at the Warsaw NATO summit in 2016 by deploying a US army combat battalion in Poland; provided sophisticated arms to Ukraine despite the protests and threats of the Russian leadership; and 3) sent Vice President Pence on a visit to the Baltic states to reassure them of the US commitment to their independence.

Trump's administration is even more positively viewed by the US's Middle East allies. For Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, Trump's administration is manna from heaven, coming on the heels of an administration that from their point of view favored foe over friends by signing a questionable nuclear agreement with Iran. The agreement only postponed Tehran's going nuclear, and also paved the way for the withdrawal of punishing sanctions and the release of \$50-100 billion of frozen funds into the Iranian treasury to support proxies in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Lebanon to undermine Arab states. Trump's sanctions against six organizations and seven individuals from Iran in July, three of whom were involved in procurement of weapons and equipment for the Revolutionary Guard; and the notice in October 2017 that Iran was failing to live up to the 2015 nuclear agreement (decertification), sent reassuring messages to these states, which are acutely worried about the recent gains of Iran and its proxies in the Syrian civil war and in Iraq.

Egypt, of course, joins its Arab Sunni allies in welcoming the change in administration and champions the new Trump-Tillerson-Mattis team over its predecessor.

The Obama administration had a particular soft spot towards the Muslim Brotherhood, which it perceived as a positive catalyst in the unfolding of Egyptian democracy during the so-called Arab Spring. Accordingly, it took a dim view of Morsi's downfall by what it saw as a military coup headed by then chief-of-staff Abdel Fattah Sisi and, since July 2013, Egypt's incumbent president. Obama suspended military aid to Egypt over human rights issues, and, for a considerable length of time, delayed the provision of 10 Apache helicopters earmarked to be used in the fight against ISIS in the Sinai Peninsula. Obama also refrained from hosting the Egyptian leader at the White House.

Trump reversed course and hosted Sisi in April 2017. Still, relations are not what they were in their heyday: \$290 million in aid was withheld in August over human rights concerns and remain suspended over Egypt's initiative in drafting a condemnation of Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital.

Paradoxically, from the point of view of its many allies, President Trump's shortcoming is not recklessness but a lack of sufficient daring. Allies in the Middle East wonder if the one-time missile strike against Syria in April 2017 to contain its use of chemical warfare was sufficient. The same question is raised regarding the US air attack a month later on the Syrian army and its Hezbollah ally as they raced south to team up with Iran-led Iraqi Shiite militias to restore the Shiite Crescent, which ISIS had temporarily destroyed.

The Trump administration decided not to follow through, with the result that the restoration is now an established fact.

Yet for all these shortcomings, the Trump administration is good news to America's allies.

For this reason, think tanks, journalists, commentators, and, above all, the political leadership in these countries should make known that President Trump and his team are promoting US interests abroad so that Americans can be better informed in their aggregate assessment of their president.

What is certain is that the allies' interests as well as American interests will be grievously affected by the tumult engendered by an American president who does not survive his full term, given the US's role as benevolent global policeman.

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