Trump and the US Foreign Policy Crisis

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Abstract

The unconventional and non-traditional trajectory of the US foreign policy, in the regime of Donald Trump, has already undone decades of the American diplomacy, evoking an intense reaction from friends and foes alike. This downward trend is not only bewildering America's staunch allies in Europe and Asia but also bringing new realisation to the rising and resurgent powers that the era of unprecedented US global hegemony is over. The retreat in the US global leadership has neither been because of "imperial overstretch" nor the "domestic under-reach" but through voluntary relinquishing of power and responsibility along with abdication of power, however, inadvertently. The US foreign policy, under the Trump administration is altering the US relationship with erstwhile allies and affecting its ability to obtain the desired outcomes.

Keywords: Donald Trump, US Foreign Policy, US Alliances, China, Russia, North Korea, Iran.

Introduction

In a short period of two years, Donald Trump ─ the 45th President of the US ─ has already undone decades of the American diplomacy. Trump's presidency frequently evokes an intense reaction, equally from his opponents and apologists. President's erratic remarks and incessant tweets have injected a certain kind of pervasive uncertainty into the American foreign policy mechanism that is significantly altering the US relationship with its foes and friends alike.

The opponents accuse the president of having torn up the traditional foreign policy rule book after identifying the key US global policy pillars and setting out to topple each one of them in turn. Trump, according to

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them, is pursuing a process of demolishing the post-war liberal international order – the delicately balanced architecture that helped Washington sustain its global leadership since the end of the World War II, thus, ensuring the accelerated collapse of the US waning hegemony. A *Los Angeles Times* editorial labelled him "so unpredictable, so reckless, so petulant, so full of blind self-regard, so un-tethered to the reality that it is impossible to know where his presidency will lead or how much damage he will do to our nation."[1] He has not only weakened this "country's moral standing in the world" but imperilled the planet through his "appalling" policy choices, thus, urging "those who oppose the new president's reckless and heartless agenda must make their voices heard."[2] The international press, echoing the same thoughts, has been no less harsh. Britain's *Observer,* assessing his first 100 days into the White House commented: "Trump's crudely intimidatory, violent, know-nothing approach to sensitive international issues has encircled the globe from Moscow to the Middle East to Beijing, plunging foes and allies alike into a dark vortex of expanding strategic instability."[3] His foreign policy has already been a disaster and has baffled commentators who are struggling to understand how a US president could be so self-destructive.

The apologists call the allegations foul and stress that Trump's playbook and agenda are as traditional as those of the previous US administrations. They translate Trump's actions as more conventional than his rhetoric and tweets. For them, the "America First" policy is not isolationist but a unilateral one and, instead of retreating from the US traditional role of leading the world, it imposes it even more firmly.[4] This paper explores the intense debate surrounding the trajectory of the American foreign policy in the age of Trump and whether it has altered the American relationship with the world, especially its ability to arrest the US waning hegemony?

[1] "Our Dishonest President," *Los Angeles Times,* April 2, 2017, http://www.latimes.com/projects/la-ed-our-dishonest-president/
[2] Ibid.
[3] "The Observer View on Donald Trump's Foreign Policy," *Guardian,* April 16, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/apr/15/observer-view-on-donald-trump-and-american-foreign-policy
[4] James Benkowski and A Bradley Potter, "The Center Cannot Hold: Continuity and Change in Donald Trump's Foreign Policy," *War on the Rocks,* November 1, 2017.

Trump Doctrine

Squarely blaming Trump for squandering decades of the unprecedented US advantage in military prowess, economic strength and technological innovation would be far from reality. Negative and long-term trends, limiting the US influence as the preeminent global leader, were already underway during Obama's administration, too. It manifested in declining share of the global economy;[5] the inability of its overwhelming military dominance to achieve expected policy goals especially within the active Middle Eastern theatres; gradual erosion of its technological primacy[6] and the ascendance of peer competitors with increasingly independent and assertive foreign policy behaviour whether in Latin America, Europe or Asia.

No doubt, the rise of resurgent and rising global powers has already constrained the US ability to obtain desired outcomes within the international arena. The trend manifested itself in the increasingly sectoral approach of erstwhile friends and allies, as reflected through the examples quoted within the paper. Instead of traditional hardcore alliances, an issue-by-issue collaboration or non-cooperation seems to be the norm of the emerging international order. The allies are cooperating where their interests converge but the increasingly divergent approach is visible on the questions involving markedly different interests from that of the US. Such a changed international environment warrants an approach based on consensus among allies on the part of the US and its continuing ability to lead the world through emphasis on the perpetuation of liberal international order and its accompanying body of human rights conventions.

However, Trump's presidency, instead of healing the existing fissures with friends and allies, have exacerbated tensions in their bilateral relationships. The shifting global landscape is forcing international actors to recalibrate the extent of their alliance with the US, no matter how important strategically. Inward-looking America, with emphasis on economic

[5] For US' share of global Gross Domestic Product (GDP) adjusted for purchasing Power Parity (PPP) from 2012 to 2022, https://www.statista.com/statistics/270267/united-states-share-of-global-gross-domestic-product-gdp/

[6] Hal Brands and Eric Edelman, "Towards Strategic Solvency: The Crisis of American Military Primacy and the Search for Strategic Solvency," *Parameters* 46, no. 4 (Winter 2016-17): 27-42.

nationalism and homeland security as well as stress on "America First" approach, is being translated into "America Alone" in spite of otherwise proclamation of the US president.[7] Analysis of the recent trajectory of the US foreign policy, from either the isolationist or assertive unilateralist prism, depicts the US on a path that undermines the American leadership in the international system, over time.

Bewildered Allies

The US reluctance to take into account sensitivities of its European allies, on a host of important bilateral and international issues, is a trend that gained momentum under Trump. Obama's much-celebrated "Pivot to Asia," his weak response to Russia's Syria adventure and ambivalent response to the Ukrainian crisis, when threatened by the Russian provocations, had already induced much resentment and brought home the point that recent developments show that the European allies are surviving through changed eras.

The extent of ambiguity prevailing in the transatlantic relationship, since Trump occupied the White House, could be gauged from how it has blown hot and cold with its staunchest ally in the European continent, the UK. Trump's absurd criticism of London's mayor Sadiq Khan, in the wake of a terrorist attack in London, in June 2017, and his Twitter spat with Prime Minister Theresa May, over posts of anti-Muslim videos, served as a catalyst to alienate people across British political spectrum. Hence, the initial offer of the pomp and ceremony of a state visit and an audience with the queen was quietly dropped. However, Trump's July 2018 visit proved no less "catastrophic," wrote Anne Applebaum in the *Washington Post* and "the backlash from Trump's Britain visit will be felt for years to come."[8] *Guardian* editorial labelled it as "the visit from hell," adding, "Mr Trump's America can no longer be regarded with certainty as a reliable ally for the European nations committed to the defence of liberal democracy. That is an epochal change for Britain and Europe."[9] The controversies generated by

[7] Heather Long, "America First is not America Alone: Trump Aims to Reset Global Opinion about him in Davos," *Washington Post*, January 24, 2018.
[8] Anne Applebaum, "The Backlash from Trump's Britain's Visit will be Felt for Years to Come," *Washington Post*, July 15, 2018.
[9] "The Guardian View on Donald Trump in Britain: This was the Visit from the Hell," *Guardian*, July 13, 2018,

Trump's remarks on already highly contentious issues in British politics, like Brexit and immigration, failed to bridge the transatlantic drift amid unprecedented protests of tens of thousands.[10] After this troubled visit, it would not be inconceivable if the UK, now, might opt to preserve a certain distance from Trump as staying too close could complicate other major diplomatic relationships.

With scepticism surrounding a post-Brexit deal with Washington, many have criticised the UK's obsession with having "special relationship" with the US, asking: "Is it not beyond time to accept that the UK is an ally of the US, not the special friend?"[11] This sense of entitlement definitely complicates the bilateral relation, especially where divergence lands longstanding allies in opposite camps, as happened in case of Trump's decision to declare Jerusalem as Israel's capital. Britain joined the other 13 members of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) in rejecting the move, declared as "unhelpful for prospects for peace in the region" by Prime Minister May and later, in the General Assembly, sided with the overwhelming majority to deny Jerusalem this recognition.[12]

These "real and meaningful short-term disruptions" are not limited to the personality of Trump, claims Xenia Wickett. She cites demographics and migration patterns having far more impact in US-Europe relations after Trump, as they are likely "to continue to diverge in terms of their regional interests and attention."[13] In spite of the persistent fear that "the Trump years may be fundamentally different from anything that has gone before" for a permanent decline in the transatlantic relationship, the report quotes secondary trigger of divergence due to weakening of institutions and treaties like the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty

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https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jul/13/the-guardian-view-on-donald-trump-in-britain-this-was-the-visit-from-hell

[10] Steve Herman, "Trump Denies Troubled Ties with Britain after Bashing PM in Interview," *VOA News*, July 13, 2018.

[11] Mary Dejevsky, "The UK's Obsession with the 'Special Relationship', not Donald Trump, is Theresa May's Real Problem," *Independent*, November 30, 2018.

[12] "UK Joins UN Nations Rejecting the US Recognition of Jerusalem as Israeli Capital," *AOL*, December 18, 2017, https://www.aol.co.uk/news/2017/12/18/uk-joins-un-nations-rejecting-us-recognition-of-jerusalem-as-isr/ on February 12, 2018.

[13] Tom Batchelor, "The US and Europe are Drifting Apart and not Just because of Trump, Finds Chatham House Study," *Independent*, January 16, 2018.

(NPT). "As their relevance declines, so they weaken as levers of transatlantic cooperation."[14]

Considering the geopolitical situation within the Atlantic alliance and Brexit, the US-French relationship has assumed additional importance as it is now the only European Union (EU) country which is a nuclear power and has a permanent seat in the UNSC. The relationship, though always complicated, had survived the disagreement over Iraq back in 2003. Though French joint effort with President George W Bush to get Syrian troops withdrawn from Lebanon in 2005 somewhat healed the rift but the differences over Iran's nuclear programme and the NATO intervention in Libya persisted. The arrival of the inward-looking Trump into the White House left a void that someone must fill, according to Nougayrede, and pushed President Emmanuel Macron to seek to reinvigorate the European project as a way of restoring French leadership. Trump's "1930s-style isolationalism and trigger-happy unilateralism"[15] foreign policy positions have demonstrated to France that it can no longer count on its ally across the Atlantic.

Trump's withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement and Macron's subsequent launch of "make the planet great again" campaign is a testimony of increasing divergence of the European interests from those of the US. Nothing explains the divergence as much as a campaign speech by Macron in March 2017, "the current unpredictability of the US foreign policy is calling into question some of our points of reference, while a wide space has been left open for the politics of power and fait accompli, in Europe, in the Middle East and also in Asia. So, it is up to us to act where our interests are at stake and to find partners with whom we will work to substitute stability and peace for chaos and violence."[16]

There is this realisation among French leadership that to usher in an era of the European Renaissance, reviving the Franco-German engine is the key. This has gotten a boost since Trump's coolness toward NATO, in particular and the EU in general. Trump blames the EU for US$150 billion trade surplus with the US and even reported to have suggested to Macron, in

[14] Batchelor, "US and Europe are Drifting Apart."
[15] Natalie Nougayrede, "France's Gamble: As America Retreats, Macron Steps Up," *Foreign Affairs* 96, no. 5 (September / October, 2017): 3
[16] Nougayrede, "France's Gamble," 7.

June 2018, to pull-out of the EU in return for a more favourable bilateral deal with the US, an account that neither the White House nor the Elysee Palace commented nor denied.[17] Though Europe can hardly fill "the strategic void" left by the US retreat but they know "Europe needs to hold the fort as long as Trump remains in office."[18] Germany, usually, is regarded as the epicentre of anti-Trump feelings within the European continent. The country simultaneously has been barracked by Trump for its huge trade surpluses with the US and its free ride on the US security guarantees.

Angela Merkel at a campaign rally, in Bavaria, stated that the days of Germany's complete reliance on the UK and the US "are to some extent over" and urged the other Europeans to "take their destiny into their own hands."[19] Despite such talk, German dilemma is its acute dependence on the US-led liberal order with its foundation in global values and norms, open markets and societies that sustain its prosperity and freedom and, also, on the US that more than any other country imports about nine per cent of its products. Thus, Germany is left with no choice but to engage with Trump no matter how difficult and unpredictable he might seem.

Since the European side increasingly believes that "transatlantic relations have lost their self-evident raison d'être,"[20] this, in turn, is forcing them to become organised. There is a renewed impetus in the European defence plans and Germany has shown willingness to meet Trump's demand of spending two per cent of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) by 2024, up from previous 1.2 per cent. Besides Trump's lack of interest in pursuing the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), free trade agreement has pushed the European partners, along with Germany, to look to strengthen trade ties with other partners such as Japan and Canada.

However, the kind of scepticism expressed by the German Foreign Minister, Sigmar Gabriel, while addressing the Berlin Foreign Policy Forum

[17] Jannat Jalil, "Donald Trump Suggested to Emmanuel Macron that 'France should Leave EU,'" *Telegraph*, June 29, 2018.
[18] Nougayrede, "France's Gamble," 8.
[19] Stefan Theil, "Berlin's Balancing Act," *Foreign Affairs* 96, no. 3 (September / October, 2017): 10.
[20] Jorg Luyken, "German-US Relations after a Year of Trump: What has Changed?," *Local de*, January 11, 2018, https://www.thelocal.de/20180111/german-us-relations-after-a-year-of-trump-what-has-changed on February 18, 2018.

speaks of underlying fissures that would further drift the partners apart. He accused Trump of leading Europe on the path towards a nuclear war and announced that Germany would pursue its own agenda rather than operating under the shadow of its ally. He asserted, "Germany can no longer simply react to the US policy but must establish its own position…. Even after Trump leaves the White House, relations with the US will never be the same."[21] Independent policy position came against Trump's decision to decertify the Iranian nuclear deal, when Gabriel said, "it was imperative Europe sticks together on this issue."[22] Similarly, the divergence of opinion was visible on North Korean issue, too.

It is not the European theatre only, where allies are finding it difficult to deal with Trump. Longstanding allies like Japan, Australia and Canada have their own share of problems with the US president. Japan is concerned as it is one country that has to worry most about the North Korean provocations so far resulting in launch of missiles 17 times[23] in its vicinity, culminating on July 4, 2017, in the test of Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) and with continued build up of the Chinese islands in the South China Sea. The North Korean development of an ICBM is a concern as it could undermine the value of Washington's security guarantee. Besides Germany, Japan had to endure the most of Trump's offences regarding currency manipulation, trade deficit and the cost of maintaining the US forces in Japan before and during the campaign. Especially problematic, from the Japanese point of view, had been Trump's coupling of economic and security matters, which Japan had tried to decouple since then.

Japan was able to get the continued US backing on the contested Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands issue, where Washington affirmed islands to be covered by the Article 5 of the US-Japanese security treaty. It was simultaneously able to pacify Trump by increasing its defence spending after which President hailed the maintenance of the US forces as "a model of cost sharing." However, the economic front, up till now, has proved more challenging, especially after Trump's withdrawal from Obama's much

[21] Tom O'Connor, "US will 'Never be the same' after Trump, Germany says," *Newsweek*, December 5, 2017.
[22] Ibid.
[23] The complete list till March 2018 can be accessed at CNBC website, https://www.cnbc.com/2018/03/14/timeline-of-north-korea-missile-launches-in-trump-first-year.html

cherished Trans-Pacific Partnership (TTP) initiative. Japan is yet determined to move ahead along with 11 countries and bring forward an amended agreement that leaves the US out.[24] How Trump's own recently announced Indo-Pacific strategy and his economic infrastructure initiative that Trump wants to implement along with Japan and Australia will be implemented and whether it can match the Chinese financial muscle remains to be seen.

The decoupling though working has brought home the realisation that being too close to Trump could prove to be more of a liability than an asset. Japan, like the rest of the allies, had been apprehensive about the US retreat from international institutions and the growing sense of threat on the Korean Peninsula. But ambiguity surrounding the US-Chinese relations has a further complicated question of competing, co-existing or cooperating with the Chinese economic regional expansionism and its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Trump, more than anyone else, has weakened the US economic leadership in Asia and Japan, like rest of the regional countries, is now reassessing its opposition to the Chinese projects like the BRI and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). None of this means that Japan is turning towards China and away from the US but it is not closing its door to anyone in Asia and the world.

Australia proved no exception to start with an uneasy alliance with the US with whom hitherto it fought beside every major conflict of the twentieth and the twenty-first century. The introductory meeting with Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull proved to be "hostile and charged" where Trump "blasted" the US-Australia refugee transfer agreement as "the worst call by far" and later vowed to "study the dumb deal" through a tweet. The disrespect shown to the Australian Prime Minister on the telephone conversation, later on, left no doubt that this presidency might pose significant challenges to the Australian interests and its foreign policy and might push Australia away from the US.[25]

Having concerns from the US withdrawal from the TPP and the Paris Climate Accord, apart from the Chinese question and its continued rise, like

[24] Takako Hokotani, "Trump's Gift to Japan: Time for Tokyo to Invest in the Liberal Order," *Foreign Affairs* 96, no. 5 (September/October, 2017): 21-27.
[25] Michael Fullilove, "Down and Out Down Under: Australia's Uneasy American Alliance," *Foreign Affairs* 96, no. 5 (September/October, 2017): 28-34.

that to Japan, is forcing the Australians to reassess the kind of dependence on the US. The debate within the country is clearly bipolar with strong pro-China and the pro-US orientation. The former point to the writing on the wall where a Beijing centred the Asian order is on the horizon but later is sceptic to show a Chinese tilt because of its uncertain domestic future and unreliable foreign policy. However, it is lamented that Trump's alternative to Obama's "pivot" or "rebalance" still lacks viability as the US initially earmarked only US$113 million for the project.[26] The strategic choice that Canberra is left with involves "greater cooperation with the like-minded regional powers" as "an important hedge against the dual hazards of a reckless China and the feckless US."[27]

Trump's renunciation of decades-long treaties and partnerships has stoked fear of abandonment in foreign capitals and Canada is much concerned with the US President's chaotic style of governance and personal fickleness. He added to the sense of flux by downgrading esteemed pattern of internationalism and his penchant for unilateralism and bellicosity. Trump's castigation of fellow members over NATO unfair share, elicited sharp response from Chrystia Freeland, Minister of Foreign Affairs for Canada: "The fact that our friend and ally has come to question the very worth of its mantle of global leadership puts into sharper focus the need for the rest of us to set our own clear and sovereign course."[28]

The US-Canada relations plummeted as Trump threatened to renegotiate the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), proclaimed as "one of the worst deals made by the country." The move put at risk the roughly 2.5 million jobs and 75 per cent of the Canadian exports tied to the pact. This did not stop Ottawa to launch an all-out trade war against Washington by filing a complaint in the World Trade Organisation (WTO) against Washington's anti-dumping and anti-subsidy duties. Even the much celebrated new US-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) replacing the NAFTA by the Trump administration has also been criticised

[26] Mike Pompeo, US Secretary of State, "Remarks on America's Economic Revival," *US Department of State*, June 18, 2018, https://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2018/06/283305.htm
[27] Fullilove, "Down and Out," 34.
[28] Jonathan Kay, "Trudeau's Trump Bump: How a Smaller America Gives Canada Room to Grow," *Foreign Affairs* 96, no. 5 (September/October, 2017): 40.

within the US as "more TPP (in the new trade deal) than not" and "a new wrapper on it (TPP) and a new bow."[29]

Trump administration has so far landed itself in controversies without discrimination with friends and allies from security to the economy to foreign policy fronts and has forced allies to adopt the sectoral approach. This sectoral approach is evident in the case of other staunch allies like India and Saudi Arabia, too. India defied the US sanctions threat and went ahead to ink US$5 billion deal to buy the Russian missile defence system.[30] While Saudi Arabia is also vowing retaliation against the US sanctions "threats" over Jamal Khashoggi, a *Washington Post* columnist and a prominent Saudi critic's forced disappearance.[31] Overall, Trump's contempt of the international institutions, his zero-sum approach towards sensitive international issues, his oblivion towards advantages of having friends and allies and being at the centre of the global order is costing the US more than any other nation. The US is wilfully abdicating leadership role and inviting players like China and Russia to advance their agenda without much resistance from the former champion of the international liberal global order.

Re-emergence of the Great Power Competition

China

For almost a year, Trump administration kept sending confused and conflicting messages and kept public guessing about the kind of relationship it wanted to cultivate with China and how. For decades, Sino-US bilateral relations have oscillated between engagement and containment strategy. However, optimism that the US administration sought constructive, result-oriented relationship, aimed to avoid direct confrontation and accept healthy competition received a blow when the National Security Strategy (NSS) on December 18, 2017, outrightly labelled China as a "strategic competitor." It

[29] Michael Collins, "New Trade Deal with Canada, Mexico Borrows Heavily from Pact that Trump Abandoned," *USA Today*, October 3, 2018.
[30] Marc Bennetts and Hugh Tomlinson, "US Threatens India with Sanctions over $5bn Deal to Buy Russian Missile Defence System," *Times*, October 4, 2018.
[31] Rosie Perper, "Saudi Arabia Vows Retaliation against the US Sanction 'Threats' Following Jamal Khashoggi's Disappearance," *Business Insider*, October 14, 2018.

claimed that China "seeks to displace the US in the Indo-Pacific region" using its "repressive visions of world order" and economic aggression.[32]

Addressing the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC), President Xi Jinping declared that his country was ready to take the centre stage of the international level and promote China as an alternative development model, makes the US sceptical about its "peaceful rise" rhetoric and add apprehension to its emergence as a world major power. The NSS holds that "for decades, the US policy was rooted in the belief that support for China's rise and its integration into the post-war international order would liberalise China. Contrary to our hopes, China expanded its power at the expense of the sovereignty of others"[33] elicited a stern reaction from Beijing. By labelling China as a global threat, Beijing accused Trump administration of stoking the "Cold War mentality" and reigniting "great power rivalry."[34]

From normalisation period under Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan to economic engagement of George H W Bush to Barack Obama, Trump's China-bashing has foreshadowed a much more confrontational relationship under the new NSS and National Defence Strategy (NDS). China has been declared as a "revisionist power" that aims "to shape the world antithetical to the US values and interests" in the NSS and the NDS articulates that China employs "predatory economics to intimidate its neighbours while militarising features in the South China Sea." This reiterates the US stance that it seeks "Indo-Pacific regional hegemony in the near-term and displacement of the US to achieve global pre-eminence in the near future." The US, thus, has injected the zero-sum equation into its bilateral relations with China.

Such a confrontational attitude is a matter for concern for the US allies, too, who partly share long-term threats posed by China's global designs. However, the US allies will remain hesitant to buy into the declared US strategy towards China as it is coming from the US administration which

[32] National Security Strategy (NSS) 2017, https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Wendy Wu, "China Hits Back at America's 'Cold War Mentality' after Donald Trump Brands it a Competitor," *South China Morning Post*, December 19, 2017.

itself has primarily attempted to "revise" fundamental elements of the prevalent international order:

i. Questioned the value of NATO and other alliances;
ii. Expressed support for authoritarian regimes;
iii. Withdrawn from global climate negotiations
iv. Eroded the base of political, economic and military ties between Washington and its allies;
v. And most importantly, seems to be grappling with the budgetary constraints at home.

The flux in Sino-US relations from Trump publicly questioning the wisdom of the US commitment to "one China" policy to its affirmation through a phone call to President Xi on February 9, 2018, that the US would continue to abide by its decades-old stance on the Taiwan question; its labelling of China as currency manipulator and the other US complaints about trade and monetary policy and Trump administration's attempt to push back against the Chinese interests in the South China Sea, indicates that both Washington and Beijing prefer taking one step at a time. The potential for downward spiral would not dissipate despite the need to continue to engage on issues like North Korea, nuclear proliferation and fight against terrorism.

Russia

Another mounting criticism against Trump is his relation with Russia. While cooperation in areas like antiterrorism and arms control is approved by all segments and considered in the US interest but this should not be at the expense of overlooking differences and indifference to the Russian meddling in Syria and Ukraine. While experts acknowledge that Russia is bound to play a key role in any crisis erupting over Syria, Ukraine, Iran or North Korea, what affects the US inability to lead in any such crisis is Trump's weakened position due to his continuing dismissal of investigations of the Russian interference in the 2016 US elections, which brings increased scrutiny to any policy related to Russia. Resultantly, it will not be easy to dismiss remarks of Mark Simakovsky, a non-resident Senior

Fellow at the Atlantic Council's Dinu Patriciu Eurasia Centre that "the President is not at the wheel of the US-Russian relations."[35]

Hence, in spite of public pronouncements by Trump wanting to cultivate good relations with Vladimir Putin's Russia, what bolstered the recent hostility has been the new NSS. Apart from China, the NSS 2017, explicitly asserts that Russia also seeks to "change the international order in its favour." While the recent NDS asserts that they "want to shape a world consistent with their authoritarian model." Besides the new Magnitsky Act sanctions[36] on the Russian nationals and authorisation of lethal arms sale to Ukraine in the face of the mounting Russian threat, escalated tensions in bilateral relations and the US policy seems to be in sharp contrast of declared Trump intention of improved ties with Kremlin. So far, like Obama's "reset," Trump's hopes of establishing a "fantastic relationship"[37] with Russia remains an illusion.

Trump's contradictory policy choices and tough rhetoric will provide both Russia and China, with the perfect opportunity, to start it all up again. China's agreement to invest US$11 billion in Russia, despite international sanctions levied against it, has nevertheless been portrayed as bonding against the US and a lasting opportunity offered to them to undercut the US influence while the world looks askance at Trump's administration. This bonding on a host of important international issues like North Korea, Iran and Syria is surely eroding the US hegemony. It has already heralded the dawn of an era where staunch US allies are decoupling China and Russia from the US declared strategy of implied confrontation as enunciated by Julie Bishop, the Australian Foreign Minister: "We have a different perspective on Russia and China, clearly. We do not see Russia or China as posing a military threat to Australia."[38] Clearly, she has spoken for many and the trend is only accelerating with time. China seems poised to take

[35] Tucker Huggins, "Despite Trump's Hopes, and Critics' Fears, US-Russia Relations remain Sour," *CNBC*, December 29, 2017, https://www.cnbc.com/2017/12/29/under-trump-us-russia-relations-remain-sour.html

[36] It is the 2012 Treasury Department Bill, named after a Russian whistleblower, Sergei Magnitsky, who died in pre-trial detention and prohibit transitions between sanctioned individuals (49 up till now) and the Americans.

[37] Jenna McLaughin and Emily Tamkin, "Under Trump, US-Russia Relations Hit New Low," *Foreign Policy*, July 6, 2017.

[38] Bates Gill, "US Allies Aren't Buying its New Strategies to Confront China," *Diplomat*, February 5, 2018.

advantage of the remarkable window of opportunity provided by the incoherent and inconsistent Trump administration's policies towards friends and foes alike.

North Korea: A Vexing Crisis of Trump's Own Making

Nothing exposed Trump's presidency and his inability to manage a global foreign policy crisis as much as the showdown between Washington and Pyongyang at the end of August 2017. Ned Price, a former National Security Council spokesperson, called it "an entirely manufactured crisis" which was "magnified by an irrational response from an American President eager to display bravado and bluster on the world stage."[39] What triggered the crisis was the story in the *Washington Post* on August 8, 2017, that the US intelligence had concluded that North Korea had successfully miniaturised a nuclear warhead, rendering it suitable to sit atop an intercontinental ballistic missile capable of striking much of the US mainland.[40] Trump's impromptu reaction of "fire and fury like the world has never seen"[41] led to an intractable stand-off between the US President and the North Korean Supreme Leader, Kim Jong-Un. Undaunted Pyongyang threatened to strike the US territory of Guam, where it operates a critical US Air Force base and a home to more than 6000 American service members.

Trump's uncontrolled language evoked the horror of a nuclear exchange. Robert Litwak, sensing the similarity and gravity of the situation, remarked "the Cuban missile crisis [is] in slow motion."[42] As expected, the provocative statement plunged his key advisers into a cover-up mode and the crisis began to dissipate once Trump removed himself from the equation. The US was left "weakened, diplomatically constrained and with even less credibility on the world stage" while North Korea got reassurance that "the US ha[d] no interest in regime change or accelerated reunification

[39] Ned Price, "Trump's Nuclear Crisis Was of His Own Making," *Foreign Policy,* August 23, 2017, http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/08/23/trumps-nuclear-crisis-was-of-his-own-making/

[40] Joby Warrick, Ellen Nakashima and Anna Fifield, "North Korea now Making Missile-ready Nuclear Weapons, US analysts say," *Washington Post,* August 8, 2017.

[41] Peter Baker and Choe Sang-Hun, "Trump Threatens 'Fire and Fury' Against North Korea if it Endangers US," *New York Times,* August 8, 2017.

[42] David E Snager and William J Board, "A 'Cuban Missile Crisis in Slow Motion' in North Korea," *New York Times,* April 16, 2017.

of Korea" ─ an assurance bolstered by the then White House Chief Strategist, Steve Bannon's public dismissal of military option altogether. [43]

However, the world today is getting accustomed to Trump's unconventional approach towards diplomacy and his dispensation with caution as he expressed willingness to embark upon a "high-wire diplomatic gambit aimed at resolving one of the world's most intractable standoffs."[44] The world's scepticism about the outcome of Trump-Kim Summit held on June 12, 2018, in Singapore, did not prove misplaced. Despite his tall claims, Trump did not leave the summit with the decision he sought and the vague four point declaration, especially lack of specifics towards "complete denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula"[45] alarmed the experts. Instead of solving the Korean problem, the threat has not abated, although Trump technically squandered the leverage of a leader-level meeting with failing to nail down benchmarks towards disarmament.

Tragic Misstep: From Accommodation to Confrontation with Iran

Apart from North Korea, Iran consistently has figured in the NSS. Both regimes are accused of destabilising the region, threatening the US and its allies and brutalising their own people. Iran was categorically singled out for sponsoring terrorism around the world and for development of ballistic missiles, with the potential to resume work on nuclear weapons that could threaten the US and its partners. Before adopting such policy line against Iran, Trump's election campaign left no doubt that, upon assuming office, he would scrap the Obama-supported Iranian nuclear deal. The decision finally came, in October 2017, when president disavowed the nuclear agreement bringing back memories of the troubled bilateral relations with the Islamic Republic starting with the infamous hostage crisis of 1979-81.

Trump probably missed the beat that given this precise troubled history, the chances of replicating a major deal of any kind with Tehran, let alone of

[43] Price, "Trump's Nuclear Crisis."
[44] Peter Baker and Choe Sang-Hun, "Trump's Abrupt 'Yes' to North Korea: The 45 Minutes That Could Alter History," *New York Times*, March 19, 2018.
[45] Joint Statement of President Donald J Trump of the United States of America and Chairman Kim Jong Un of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea at the Singapore Summit, *White House*, June 12, 2018, https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/joint-statement-president-donald-j-trump-united-states-america-chairman-kim-jong-un-democratic-peoples-republic-korea-singapore-summit/

the magnitude of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), would be next to impossible and it might prove to be an irreversible mistake that further plunge bilateral relationship to a new low. Malcolm Byrne asserted that Trump's "speechifying may satisfy his base but it has also already unnecessarily contaminated the ground for any future talks." He might view it largely through a "domestic-political" lens but it will bring non-endorsement from the Washington's European allies.[46] The warning proved prophetic for not only allies but it also gave enough room to antagonistic narrative propagated by the hard-liners within the regime. Trump's final withdrawal from the nuclear deal is already having significant repercussions for the US relations with its allies, too. The UK, France and Germany so far have chosen to stand against this provocative move and kept expressing serious reservations. The question remains as how long these countries are willing to take the direct heat from the US secondary sanctions on the European businesses trading in Iran. In addition to it, Tehran also seems willing to play the long game with Trump as they have not shown any sign of accepting his latest offer of an unconditional meeting with the Iranian leadership.

Conclusion

According to a recent Gallop poll survey, the US leadership approval ratings have hit a "historic low," declining by 10 per cent points or more in 65 countries from 2016 to 2017, placing the US even below China worldwide.[47] What has brought the unprecedented world's superpower to this point has been Trump's disdain of international cooperation, his practice of economic nationalism, his "America-First" rhetoric, weakening cohesion among the Western allies in the face of mounting challenges from China and Russia and Trump's abdication of leadership role in multilateral arrangements like the TPP and the Paris Climate Accord.

The Gallop report stated: "It is too early in Trump's Presidency to deem his 'America First' policy a success or failure. However, it is clear that based on the trajectory of what the world thinks of the US, many of the US

[46] Malcolm Byrne, "The Trump Administration's Tragic Misstep on Iran," *New York Times*, October 17, 2017.
[47] Julian Borger, "World's Confidence in the US leadership under Trump at New Low, Poll Finds," *Guardian*, January 18, 2018.

alliances and partnerships… are potentially at risk."[48] The question is not whether President Xi's "Chinese Dream" [49] poses a long-term challenge to the US leadership. The fact is that the US has long been on a trajectory that has brought these rising and resurgent powers to the fore. Unfortunately, the retreat in global leadership has neither been because of "imperial overstretch" nor the "domestic under-reach" but through voluntary relinquishing of power and responsibility, through abdication, however, inadvertently. Richard Hass believes this abdication should not be mistaken for isolationism but it has undoubtedly been manifested in the US which is "no longer taking the lead in maintaining alliances, or in building regional and global institutions that set the rules of how international relations are conducted. It is abdication from what has been a position of leadership in developing the rules and arrangements at the heart of any world order."[50]

Such a policy has overt negative long-term repercussions, the most obvious being the US, by the end of Trump's era ─ considering the trend persists in his years ─ would never be the US that kept allies allied and deterred foes and, also, whose international posture conferred undisputed global leadership status on the US. It is too early to foresee where this abdication might ultimately land the US but the era of Trump may likely go down in history as the beginning of the end of decades-long acknowledged US global leadership.

[48] Borger, "World's confidence in the US leadership."
[49] Kerry Brown, "In Many Ways, the 'China Dream' is not Different from the American One," *Guardian*, January 31, 2014.
[50] Richard Hass, "America and the Great Abdication: Don't Mistake Donald Trump's Withdrawal for Isolationism," *Atlantic*, December 28, 2017.