

President Trump Assaults U.S. Allies, Undermines Existing World Order

By Don Sutherland

In just two thunderous tweets, the more than 70-year relationship between the United States and its North American, European, and East Asian allies was shaken. A day later, following the lead of President Donald Trump's Twitter tantrum, his advisers Larry Kudlow and Peter Navarro piled on like bullies in a schoolyard. Not even during the height of the Cold War when the Soviet Union actively sought to precipitate a breakup of the Western alliance had there been such a crisis in the relationships between the United States and its closest allies.

The crisis is deep and intense, not because it concerns policy differences, but because it involves a fundamental difference in principles. The American President and the heads of state of the United States' allies hold different and difficult to reconcile principles.

Policy differences can be overcome by pragmatic compromise built on common ground and a measure of good faith. Matters of principle can lead to far longer breaks, as principle is the common ground upon which relationships are built, nurtured, and strengthened. In the absence of principle, distrust is preeminent.

The United States' G-7 partners continue to embrace a world order based on free markets, individual liberty and human rights, and a rules-based approach to addressing differences among countries. President Trump sees free markets as "rigged" against the United States. Toward that end, he has bullied successful companies such as Amazon.com. He has launched an initiative aimed at bailing out dying coal companies. He has abandoned the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) Agreement, all but left the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and imposed steel and aluminum tariffs on American allies for the flimsiest of reasons.

He rejects notions of individual freedom and human rights. He has assaulted freedom of the press. His mercantilist trade policies seek to punish consumers and businesses for having freely made their own purchasing decisions in a market setting. His Administration has cruelly separated families of undocumented immigrants with no disregard for the welfare of such families and the impact it will have on their children.

He rejects a rules-based system. Domestically, he has assailed the integrity of the nation's Intelligence and law enforcement communities. He has attacked the Department of Justice and attempted to bend its investigative work to his political goals. He has often hinted at persecution of his political rivals. He has floated the absurd notion that he can break free of the constraints of the rule of law with a self-pardon.

Overseas, he has walked away from the TPP, abandoned the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, and withdrawn from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action aimed at limiting Iran's prospects of developing a nuclear weapons capability. He has done all of this by defiantly ignoring the concerns and views of longstanding U.S. allies. He has done all this without offering not just any potentially better alternative, but without offering any alternative at all.

In effect, President Trump is governing as a revolutionary leader. He does not seek improved outcomes within a world order that is responsible for bringing together Europe in peace, promoting global prosperity, enabling the East Asian "economic miracle," and so much more. Instead, he seeks to smash that world order.

Following the disastrous G-7 Summit, German Chancellor Angela Merkel explained that she found the meeting "sobering" and "depressing." This disorientation is what happens when a country's leader encounters another's who seeks to overthrow the current order. Henry Kissinger explained:

A status quo power always has difficulty in coming to grips with a revolutionary period. Since everything it considers "normal" is tied up with the existing order, it usually recognizes too late that another state means to overthrow the international system.

That the leader a country that contributed so greatly to building the current world order is now seeking to tear it down, makes that development even more incomprehensible. That the current world order was responsible for enormous economic and human progress makes the current situation extraordinary. That a leader who has shown little interest for the achievements of his predecessors and no willingness to honor international commitments made in the name of the United States is seeking to topple that world order is probably not all that surprising. Thus, the German Chancellor has good cause to find the outcome depressing.

What lies ahead remains uncertain. It very likely would be worse than the status quo.

If the combination of his impulsive governance style, exaggerated confidence in his "deal-making" prowess, famous disregard for policy detail, and nihilistic zero-sum view of international relations are representative, a Trumpian world order would be characterized by instability, impaired economic and social progress, lack of awareness of nations' critical interests, and rigid positions that invite clashes, both diplomatically and on the battlefield. The vacuum created from the United States' abdicating from a meaningful world role would likely be filled by ambitious illiberal powers.

The result could be a world order that would resemble that which immediately preceded World War I. Another result could be an order that evolves in similar fashion as occurred during the interval between World Wars I and II, though the precise details would differ. Yet another outcome could be a new order under which illiberalism gradually erases the Enlightenment values at the basis of the current world order. None of those scenarios would be an improvement over the current arrangement.

Perhaps President Trump might eventually discover that unlike with his failed businesses, there is no Chapter 11 protection from failed foreign policy. By then, lasting and significant damage may have been inflicted on the U.S. national interest and globally.