

Donald Trump and the “Business” of Statecraft

Abstract: *The world by now knows what to expect from President Trump’s upside-down diplomacy. He often displays a disturbing affinity for adversaries, while he disparages vital allies. Theories abound to account for his behavior, and many are accurate in their own right. But, none of them represent a completely coherent, consistent explanation for the totality of Trump’s foreign policy approach. Perhaps, however, there is no “logic”—no “doctrine” to identify; perhaps there is simply this President’s business “instinct.” This essay argues that President Trump superimposes his view of the business world onto his practice of foreign policy more comprehensively than is commonly understood. To that end, nation-states are assigned familiar roles from which they can rarely escape in his outlook. To Trump, all countries are akin to business organizations; all executive leaders are CEOs. Large adversaries like China and Russia are equals in his eyes—and are treated accordingly. But, allies are akin to “contractors” or “clients” in Trump’s mind—and are treated with the same dismissiveness and contempt as he has historically treated such organizations in his business dealings. It is the false parallel of the worlds of business and foreign relations that shape Donald Trump’s inverted approach to diplomacy, to the detriment of the United States and to the delight of America’s adversaries.*

President Donald Trump’s approach to foreign policy has become, if nothing else, predictable. He treats the leaders of longstanding and vital allies with dismissiveness, and sometimes outright disdain, while he displays a disturbing affinity for, and even deference to, the leaders of some of America’s most significant adversaries. The vivid [juxtaposition](#) between Trump’s acrimonious June [G7 meeting](#) and his subsequent, much friendlier, [summit with Kim Jong Un](#) provided the world with an apt microcosm of Trump’s upside-down diplomacy. The very same scenario was repeated in July at not only the [NATO Summit](#), but also during his [visit to Britain](#)—and then during Trump’s exceedingly deferential [summit with Vladimir Putin](#) (the charges brought by Special Counsel Mueller against 12 members of Russia’s GRU were of no consequence to the President during his one-on-one meeting). And, in September before the United Nations General Assembly, President Trump yet again displayed a palpable flippancy toward his audience.

Yet, despite its predictability, the totality of Trump’s inverted statesmanship continues to vex the best minds in foreign policy; there seems to be no coherent, holistic rationale for it. Not surprisingly, even supporters of the President have significant trouble rationalizing his approach toward adversaries and allies alike. Theories abound to account for many of Trump’s *specific* behaviors toward specific entities: [Russia](#) has something on Trump, or he is in league with them, so he treats Putin with kid-gloves; Trump has always been enamored with the use of [tariffs](#) to remedy perceived trade imbalances, so he institutes them on adversaries and allies alike to attempt to force a capitulation to his outlook; Trump finds [international alliances and organizations](#) constricting, so he is outwardly critical of NATO, the G7, the UN and the WTO. All of these may indeed be accurate motivations explaining aspects of Trump’s foreign policy attitude. But none of these constitute a holistic, explanatory “doctrine” for his overarching approach to foreign policy; they do not combine neatly.

So, *can* Trump’s overall foreign policy approach be explained? What serves as his rationale—his logic?

Perhaps the best explanation does not lie in a coherent “rationale” or “logic.” Perhaps, instead, Trump’s approach proceeds more from a base “instinct,” grounded dually in this President’s penchant (or need) for simplicity over nuance, and a tendency to superimpose his business worldview onto otherwise unfamiliar environments—like that of statecraft.

The Worlds of Statecraft and Business: Mirror Images in the Mind of Trump

A classic theory of international relations is that all nation-states function within an anarchic world, where there is no universal governance. The world is thus necessarily ordered by power and interests. That theory, at first glance, relates well to Trump's own understanding of the business world within which he operated for so long (and in some ways still operates, despite his office). Power, for Trump, is the only real language of business—and he is not wont to employ it subtly. But, it has become clear that Trump conflates the worlds of statecraft and business in a disturbingly simplistic way; he sees little difference in their natures and in how power is applied, and that lack of distinction colors his approach to foreign relations.

Contrary to this worldview, there are, of course, significant differences between the worlds of diplomacy and business. In the world of diplomacy, cooperative relations and alliances often stem from a long-term cohesion of values between societies; common interests spring forth from those shared values. Conflicts among and between allies—when they do arise—usually *reflect* the values that undergird their bonds; such conflicts rarely *threaten those foundational bonds*. Relative levels of power between actors are often implicitly acknowledged in diplomatic interactions, such as between the United States and other nations. Stronger actors often self-constrain so as to not be overbearing or threatening. There is a consideration that present interaction affects future interactions, and powerful actors are thus usually quite circumspect in pursuing their interests.

By contrast, in Trump's view of business, partnerships are transactional. The long-term health of the organization is not a matter of interdependence, but independence; shared interests are conditional and largely ephemeral—they are not results of any shared values beyond the deal at hand. That contrast is as significant as it is telling. It shines a light on the fact that, instead of entering the universe of international affairs, Donald Trump has superimposed his universe onto it. Instead of extending a CEO mentality to the presidency, the presidency has become an extension of his undeniably unique CEO mentality.

President Trump therefore sees the US Government as *his* business organization; he believes it is (or should be) *his* to run as “CEO.” Not only are members of the executive branch his “employees,” but members of coequal branches are also in (or should be in) subordinate positions. (And, to be clear, many Republicans in Congress act as if they are subordinates to Trump, reinforcing this worldview.) Other nation-states, to Trump, are akin to other business organizations; their executive leaders are “CEOs,” like him.

To this end, Trump assigns nation-states familiar roles from which they can rarely escape in his mind—they are either worthy competitors, organizations that depend upon him or organizations that rarely have a bearing on his organization, therefore requiring little consideration unless there is a “transaction” at hand. Looking at Trump's activities on the foreign policy stage through the prism of this hypothesis offers a holistic explanation for why Trump's attitude toward adversaries and allies is so upside-down.

America's Most Powerful Adversaries: Trump's “Club of Equals”

President Trump displays a personal affinity for, and sometimes deference to, world “CEOs” like Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin even when he sometimes enacts policies that are harmful to their “organizations.” He sees these adversaries as men like himself, who were capable of climbing to

the top of their respective nations and, like him, head organizations that are equal to his own in relative size and power. These men and their nation-states are potent and autonomous. Trump sees himself, and these leaders, as exceptional; as CEOs, he and they are a rare breed and together constitute an exclusive club. They run the world. They are the *alphas*. Though Xi and Putin are his rivals, these “CEOs” are the kinds of people with whom Trump can, and should, make “deals.”

This does not mean that these nation-states are always treated sympathetically or as if they are outright allies. Indeed, Trump often institutes, or acquiesces to the enactment of, policies that are overtly detrimental to these rival organizations. For instance, Trump continues to actively institute [economic tariffs on China](#) in order to force better long-term trade conditions. Their retaliation is predictable—and damaging to many American industries. Yet, the President is undaunted; he has decided it is a cost his organization is willing to pay; affected American organizations and citizens are expected to [toe the line](#) and trust his judgment. After all, [trade wars are easy to win—if everyone is on board](#). Likewise, President Trump has (often reluctantly) gone along with enacting sanctions—forced upon him by Congress—[on Russia](#). He has also undertaken actions himself, such as [arming Ukraine](#) and [bombing Syria \(twice\)](#), that clearly contravene Russian interests. And, Russia objects sometimes vociferously to these activities. In other words, rivals are treated as rivals. Trump expects them to hit him, and he expects to hit back.

However, offsets are often also involved with rival leaders in the “club of equals.” For instance, President Trump spontaneously offered [concessions to China over ZTE](#), a company unambiguously designated as a security threat by US intelligence. He has also made impromptu suggestions that Russia be [readmitted to the G7](#) to become again the G8; he recently suggested that he’s open to [recognizing the annexation of Crimea](#); and, he has referred to [Vladimir Putin as a “competitor,”](#) instead of an enemy or adversary when given the opportunity to do so, calling it a [“compliment”](#) at his post Putin summit press conference. Indeed, by all accounts, Trump ignored every [transgression Russia has recently committed](#) while at the Helsinki summit where he could directly address them—including Russia’s meddling in the 2016 election, and its continued, active meddling in the 2018 election—in the name of improving relations. Moreover, both China’s and Russia’s human rights transgressions seem to be of no consequence to Mr. Trump; he rarely mentions them in any context. Trump’s offsets, or implicit concessions, convey the message that he is negotiating; he recognizes their organizations’ equality to his own, so they deserve a “deal.”

Notably, Kim Jong Un seems to have graduated into Trump’s “club of equals.” His open defiance of the President, coupled with his possession of nuclear weapons, changed Trump’s approach to Kim. After initially attempting to hector him, the President has [recently](#) treated Kim with [significant deference](#) even as it becomes clear Kim has [little intention of actually dismantling his nuclear program](#). Kim exercises complete control over his “organization”—and that, to Trump, is [impressive, if not admirable](#). Kim’s heinous and unforgivable transgressions against his own people as well as toward the rest of the world, and his blatant disregard for international norms display to Trump that he is powerful and worthy to be branded as a “rival.”

America’s Lowly Allies: Dependent and Powerless

By contrast, and perhaps even more consequentially, Trump sees America’s allies very differently from these large adversaries. The allies are not powerful unto themselves. To Trump, American

allies are more akin to bothersome contractors for, or needy clients of, his “organization.” (In his business career, Trump has a very [long, well documented, history](#) of treating such organizations with contempt and dismissiveness, often violating contracts by refusing to pay for their work.)

Allies are thus “organizations” from whom the President can make demands—they either work for, or are dependent upon, his organization. He is in charge. No deals are needed. He dictates terms. What’s more, to Trump, these organizations represent an onerous cost to his “organization.” America’s allies *charge too much* and *do too little*. Their CEOs are thus not his equals; their “organizations” flourish only through the aegis of the United States. So, if their leaders praise Trump and/or fall in line with his policies, then they are in his good graces and sometimes even [worthy of praise](#). But, when they do not offer effusive praise, or when they question his judgment or even defy his decisions or wishes, [they draw his ire](#).

Leaders from Emmanuel Macron to Justin Trudeau to Shinzo Abe initially played to Mr. Trump’s ego, purposefully charming him in order to influence his policies. Yet, they, along with many other vital allies, now suffer from the same onerous tariffs as an adversary like China. Adding insult to injury, Trump had [to label America’s closest allies as national security threats](#) in order to institute the tariffs legally, without Congress’ assent (assent he likely would not have received). The tariffs instituted on allies come with no hint of the kinds of quid-pro-quo afforded leaders of adversarial powers. Instead, they are designed to force a capitulation on trade practices the President sees as one-sided and as missteps agreed to by his executive predecessors.

What’s more, South Korea’s President, Moon Jae In, saw [Trump suspend indefinitely without notice joint military exercises to appease Kim](#). Trump’s rationale? The exercises are provocative to North Korea—and they cost too much. Neither the perspective of South Korea, nor the perspectives of allies, nor even Trump’s own national security and diplomatic teams mattered—no one was consulted, let alone warned that this was even a possibility before it was announced.

To Trump, allies need him more than he needs them; they are reliant upon his “business.” He can treat them any way he sees fit—and he does.

The Triviality of the Rest of the World

There are, of course, other nations in the world that do not neatly fall into the category of large adversarial powers, nor into the category of vital, longstanding allies. Such countries, to President Trump, are akin to corporations or organizations headed by CEOs that are of no immediate consequence to his organization. To Trump, nation-states large and small that are not directly involved in what he finds important are just there. They are like free radicals—organizations of which he is aware, but in which he is normally disinterested.

When such countries do, for some reason, come to the fore of Trump’s attention, disinterest often turns to disregard—or even disdain. During the course of the recent debates over immigration, for instance, the President referred to many nations from which many people attempt to emigrate—both legally and illegally—as [“s***hole countries](#).” These nation-states have real challenges, and these challenges are often direct causes of their citizens’ desires to emigrate. Those challenges, however, are of no consequence to the US because their troubles, much like the troubles of corporations or organizations unrelated to or uninvolved with his own business, do not concern

Trump. Their plight is their plight alone, or at least the plight of their region and neighbors. It does not concern the US.

Notably, a nation like Iran is probably best characterized in this hypothesis of Trump's worldview as a part of this group rather than the "club of equals." Iran has not been elevated in Trump's mind like North Korea; it is still an adversary worthy of attention, but it is not significant enough to warrant negotiation—it can be hectored. The President's unilateral [withdrawal from the JCPOA](#) and his recent, [belligerent rhetoric](#) toward the Iranian regime (in response to aggressive rhetoric uttered by Iranian leaders, it must be noted) conveys that he does not see this nation-state as an equal; they are unworthy of negotiation; they must capitulate to US demands. Venezuela is also best characterized in the same vein as Iran—as a foe that can be hectored—in this case, by suggesting a potential [invasion](#) to effect regime change. No dialogue is needed with these nations. To Trump, they are akin to organizations with which he doesn't do business.

Trump's Instinct: An Illogical Logic

Trump supporters have always touted the President's business acumen as his most fundamental strength. And, indeed, at first glance the CEO approach to foreign policy in many cases gives an impression of strength. To many, a strong America should be able to impose its will when it wants. But, a more nuanced view reveals just how shortsighted his approach really is when it comes to longstanding allies. There is such a thing as soft power, and it is often effective—especially as a long-term strategy; its role in foreign policy often seems to be lost on this President. Trump's attitude instead tends to be overbearing toward any nation he sees as weaker than or dependent upon the US. In Trump's worldview, such nations are quite often America's staunchest allies. That means that allies have little room to be anything other than minions in this President's eyes: acceptable, but trifling, if they follow; recalcitrant, and expendable, if they disagree.

The United States has been at the center of world diplomacy for generations because it has fostered lasting partnerships, based upon shared values and ideals, from a position of strength. It has rarely sought confrontation to achieve capitulation from its friends. The foreign policy apparatus President Trump inherited has maintained the status quo approach to foreign policy sometimes in spite of Trump's own machinations. Nonetheless, that approach is fundamentally under threat from President Trump; he speaks of sovereignty in place of rules & norms; prefers rule of man to rule of law; embraces raw power as the order. This erodes the stability of the structure the US largely built. To Trump, there is no statecraft, only the business of running organizations. And, his instinctive categorization of the world as sets of either rival or dependent organizations, relative to his own, guides his actions.

In truth, the world of diplomacy is fundamentally different from the world of business. But, it is unfamiliar territory to Donald Trump. Because of this, Trump superimposes his concept of the world of business upon the world of statecraft because it feels familiar. It is an ill fit. As a result, the near future does not augur well for American foreign policy, for there is no obvious path for America's staunchest allies to be elevated from "dependents" in Trump's worldview. And so, it seems that as long as President Trump is in office, this disturbing pattern of foreign policy will continue—to the detriment of the United States, and the sheer delight, no doubt, of America's adversaries.