

POLICY INITIATIVES OF PRESIDENT TRUMP'S CABINET:

HOW THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION IS SHAPING WASHINGTON, CHANGING FOREIGN POLICY AND ADDRESSING THE CULTURE OF GOVERNING

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From the recently concluded Singapore summit with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un to the uncertainties over U.S. relations with its traditional allies to the upcoming meeting with Russia's Vladimir Putin, President Trump is making sweeping changes in the nation's relationship with the world.

The basis of the President's "America First" approach to foreign policy is clear: If it appears that the United States is being taken advantage of in any way, the President will move to counteract whatever is happening. Almost every statement he has made on the subject reflects his core belief that America must demonstrate strength. His foreign policy is also driven by a conviction that his deal-making ability will make America paramount in world affairs.

This has led him to cancel many of the policy initiatives of the Bush and Obama years, including reversing a number of trade agreements, withdrawing from the Paris Climate Accord and pulling the U.S. out of the multinational agreement to trade sanctions relief for an end to Iran's nuclear weapons program.

At State, a New Leader but Too Few Diplomats

The President's first secretary of state, Rex Tillerson, an oil company executive friendly with Vladimir Putin, never developed a successful working relationship with President Trump and so he has been replaced by Mike Pompeo, a former congressman who had been serving as CIA director.

Pompeo, at least so far, seems to have the President's confidence. But against this is the fact that many State Department posts remain unfilled, which means countries trying to contact the administration to press particular concerns have trouble doing so. Among the dozens of unfilled posts are 23 ambassadorships, several of them for key allies like South Korea, Australia and Belgium, which is the capital of the European Union; the undersecretary for public diplomacy; the assistant secretaries for the Near East, East Asia, and the Western Hemisphere; the Director of the Foreign Service, and the U.S. representative to the EU.

An Opening to North Korea

Mr. Trump's decision to become the first U.S. President to meet North Korea's leader in a ceremony more befitting a respected world leader than a brutal dictator has clearly established that this President is not like any other. The Singapore Summit, however, has not yet resulted in any agreement on international verification of the nuclear disarmament that Kim promised. President Trump also did not raise the issue of North Korea's flagrant violations of human rights.

President Trump has said the North Korea problem is solved. For now, though, it remains a nuclear power and it will be years before we know whether the world is indeed safe from its nuclear missiles. What is certain is that the tensions that erupted in 2017 when Kim and Trump were exchanging insults and arguing over whose nuclear button was bigger have subsided.

On Again, Off Again with China

Perhaps the most perplexing relationship President Trump has developed is with China. After entertaining President Xi Jinping at Mar-a-Lago last year (Ivanka Trump's daughter sang in Mandarin as part of the ceremony) and developing what seemed to be a warm friendship, Mr. Trump has declared a trade war on the Chinese. China is retaliating with higher tariffs on \$450 billion worth of American imports. Prices for one of the targeted items, U.S. soybeans, have already declined 15 percent.

Yet the Trump Administration has been consistent in seeking Chinese help in dealing with North Korea, and there are many who think that the primary beneficiary of the Singapore Summit was China. Kim traveled twice to Beijing before the summit and once afterward, indicating a growing closeness with the Chinese leader.

Also, despite his tough rhetoric about Chinese business practices, President Trump has moved to save ZTE, a telecommunications giant banned from buying U.S. components because it violated sanctions against Iran and North Korea. The President said China couldn't afford to lose the jobs.

President Xi's stated goals are advancing China technologically and militarily, challenges to America's global leadership that Mr. Trump has not addressed in any detail.

Are Trade Wars Really “Easy to Win”?

After pulling the U.S. out of the Trans Pacific Partnership, President Trump insisted on renegotiating the North American Free Trade Agreement with Canada and Mexico. All three countries agree NAFTA needs to be updated, but the negotiations have been more difficult and drawn-out than originally expected. The process was made even more difficult when Mr. Trump hit Canada and Mexico with tariffs on steel and aluminum imports, and then criticized Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau for saying he would take countermeasures.

Consistent with this controversial policy of starting trade wars with friendly nations, President Trump has also slapped tariffs on auto imports from Europe. Predictably, the EU has struck back, aiming its tariffs at products from states that voted for President Trump in 2016 (a strategy the Chinese are also pursuing). One of the targeted companies, Harley-Davidson, has already announced it is shifting some of its motorcycle production overseas to avoid the tariffs, a decision that an angry President called “the beginning of the end” for the iconic company.

Closer to Israel, Farther from Palestinians

Under President Trump, the always fraught Middle East peace process, which Trump’s son-in-law Jared Kushner is now in charge of, is clearly challenged. It appears a plan to address this is imminent. The two-state solution that has been sponsored by U.S. Presidents for well over half a century essentially ended with Mr. Trump’s decision to move the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, leading the enraged Palestinians to argue the United States is no longer a neutral broker. The Trump administration has also withdrawn from the U.N. Human Rights Council, calling it “anti-Israel” and “a cesspool of political bias.”

President Trump’s national security adviser John Bolton has argued that the move to Jerusalem is “a physical demonstration of the U.S. commitment to Israel, which is in fact a commitment to our national security interests. Closer economic partnership with Israel will only increase America’s prosperity, which, as President Trump has pointed out, leads to greater security.”

But the fact remains that the closer the administration moves to Israel, the farther away it gets from the current Palestinian leaders. Mr. Kushner's plan, while still confidential, is apparently designed to convince a younger generation of Palestinians that their self-interest lies in forgetting past grievances and striking a deal with Israel that will bring them prosperity as well as peace. It remains to be seen whether his appeal will work.

Embracing the Russian Bear

President Trump continues to seek a better relationship with Vladimir Putin and is planning a summit with the Russian president this summer. Mr. Trump has urged the G7 to readmit Russia as a member despite its having illegally seized Crimea and invaded Eastern Ukraine. The fact that critics accuse President Trump of making nice with repressive bullies like Putin, Kim and Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines while making trade wars with friends like Canada and the EU has not deterred the President one bit.

Policy Problems South of the Border

Relationships with Latin America have not fared well under President Trump. He canceled his scheduled trip there in April citing the ongoing crisis in Syria, an excuse that many found less than convincing. His use of the loaded word "infest" in describing immigrants from Central America and Mexico has angered many throughout the region. And his repeated insistence on building a wall along the border with Mexico remains a source of friction, even though Congress seems uninterested in fully funding it.

The President has also terminated the Obama administration's diplomatic opening to Cuba, urging Americans not to travel there and banning U.S. citizens from doing business with Cuban entities.

Summing It Up

President Trump is pursuing foreign policy based on his self-described feeling that years of traditional diplomacy have been misguided and that his America First policy will "Make America Great Again." He has at least two more years to prove he is right.