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America Searching for Respect: The flawed logic of Donald Trump's foreign policy

Donald Trump has pledged to restore international respect for the United States. His combative foreign policy approach, based on strength, transactionalism and inconsistent messages, risks doing just the opposite.

President Donald Trump's inauguration speech and recent media appearances have done little to dispel domestic and international fears regarding a seismic shift in America's foreign policy. Trump's first speech as president was a throwback to his raucous campaign, and in stark contrast to the conciliatory tone of his victory speech in November.

Much attention has also been paid to his unorthodox views on Russia in the wake of an intelligence community report on Moscow's meddling in the US election, and unverified revelations on the nature of Trump's relationship with the Kremlin. To confuse matters further, the Senate confirmation hearings for his incoming cabinet showed considerable dissonance between Trump and his team on key foreign policy issues. What do these recent events reveal about the new administration's broader foreign policy approach?

Central to Trump's message of Making America Great Again, reiterated in his inauguration speech, is the insistence that during his tenure the US will be "respected" by other states. However, the president clings to a narrow and potentially dangerous view on how to gain respect in international politics. While it would be a stretch too far to say that his foreign policy views are informed by a coherent theory of power in

international politics, there is a logic – albeit a flawed one – to Trump's foreign policy.

Trump's version of a respected United States is based on building strength at home and readiness to exert economic pressure and military power much more forcefully than his predecessor. This "peace through strength" approach amounts to a curious mix of isolationism and heightened preparedness to use coercive means. Whether it comes to trade or diplomacy, for Trump international politics is a zero-sum game where respect is won through instilling fear in adversaries and keeping others, even traditional allies, guessing about whether America will abide by its international commitments. The guessing game extends across the international board, to security guarantees, trade agreements and global governance issues. Central to the Trumpian approach is transactionalism, the art of striking deals that are beneficial to the interests of the United States, defined in terms of relative as opposed to absolute gains.

There are at least three glaring problems with Trump's foreign policy approach when it comes to his aim of gaining international respect. First and foremost, respect is reciprocal in nature. Regardless of how Trump views the international arena, it is his audience – the leaders

of other countries and their anxious publics – that ultimately determines how the United States will be perceived across the globe. Bullying and displays of power rarely produce long-term amicable relationships, the type that leaders can rely on when faced with complex global crises.

Secondly, threats and the use of force are more costly means of maintaining relationships than friendly gestures that foster goodwill and sustainable respect, something a president bent on monetizing everything would do well to keep in mind. A softer conciliatory tone would be preferable when it comes to dealing with partners and allies, but may also bear fruit in more complicated relationships, such as economic relations with China. The US should not shy away from taking a tough line when such a course is necessary, but it is unwise to go abroad looking for trouble with combative rhetoric that angers allies and drives adversaries to retaliation.

A third factor in the Trumpian approach is the disconnect between the president and his cabinet nominees on key foreign policy issues. In his senate hearing, Secretary of State nominee Rex Tillerson, for instance, called Russia a "danger", a sentiment shared by Mike Pompeo, Trump's choice to lead the CIA. Tillerson also pledged adherence to NATO's Article

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5 and took a firm stand on nuclear proliferation. Secretary of Defence James Mattis stepped further from the trodden path by defending the Iran nuclear deal and rejecting the use of torture. Trump, in turn, has been opaque when it comes to his relationship with Russia and only grudgingly accepted the intelligence agencies' assessment of Moscow's election meddling. The president has also lambasted the Iran deal, undermined America's commitment to NATO, and given statements endorsing the use of torture.

On the face of it, such a disconnect appears to corroborate reports that the Trump team is entering the White House in a state of disarray, but it is also plausible that the nominees were merely pandering to the Senate committees. Another explanation, perhaps less likely given the president's character, is that Trump has surrounded himself with people who are not afraid to disagree with their boss on complex international questions. The bottom line is that the appearance of inconsistency is amplifying the air of uncertainty surrounding the new administration. Fostering these contradictions may chime with Trump's transactionalist inclinations, but it is hardly conducive to winning respect in the eyes of the international community.

In sum, Donald Trump's approach to international relations is founded on playing the tough isolationist in matters of trade, being prepared to subdue perceived enemies, and questioning America's sustained commitment to global governance initiatives. At the same time, the administration is sending an inconsistent foreign policy message, which instills uncertainty by promising to conduct relations with friend and foe alike in a case-by-case manner. It remains unlikely that this flawed approach will achieve Trump's aim of cultivating international respect for the United States, least of all in the long run.