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Trump's Remaking of US Foreign Policy

By Gilbert Doctorow

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Over the weekend, President-elect Trump received two journalists from mainstream European print media — *The Times of London* and the German magazine *Bild* — for a joint interview in New York City's Trump Tower. The event was videotaped and we are seeing some remarkable sound bites, particularly those of interest to the British and German publics.

For the government of British Prime Minister Theresa May, nothing could have sounded sweeter than Donald Trump's statement that she would be invited for talks in the White House shortly after he is sworn in on Jan. 20 and that he seeks very quickly to reach agreement on a bilateral free trade pact. The effect of the pledge itself, even ahead of its successful implementation, assures the British that the sting of severing ties with the European Union will be greatly offset by new commercial possibilities in the world's biggest economy; in this way, it strengthens May's hand enormously as she enters into talks with the E.U. leadership over the detailed terms of what will apparently be a "Hard Brexit."

Further adding to her leverage with the E.U. were Trump's remarks suggesting that the E.U. will face stern trade pressure, beginning with Germany and its automobile industry, to do more to manufacture in the U.S. That precisely raises the relative importance of the U.K. market, which the E.U. will otherwise lose if it imposes severe penalties on Britain in negotiations over Brexit.

For the general public's consumption, Donald Trump used the interview to explain his special affection for Britain, speaking about his Scottish mother's delight in the Queen and her watching every royal event on television for its unequaled pageantry. But we may expect that Prime Minister May will find there is a bill to pay for the "special relationship" with the U.S. under President Trump.

Rather than the British media's early speculation that Prime Minister May would be the one to set the misguided Trump straight about the nefarious Vladimir Putin, she may now have to become a leading European advocate for détente with Russia at Trump's behest. In this connection, British Foreign Minister Boris Johnson's advice to Congress during his visit to Washington last week that Official Washington "stop demonizing Putin" may well have been a straw in the wind.

For the Germans, Trump also offered a bit of flattery, saying how much he respected their Chancellor Angela Merkel. However, as he went on, he virtually flattened the Iron Lady's reputation by calling her open-door policy of admitting migrants into Germany and the E.U. a catastrophe. He noted that Merkel's controversial position had swayed the election results in Britain on Brexit and may lead to the departure of other countries from the E.U. Given his staff's consultation with Marine Le Pen, a visiting French candidate for the presidency from the right-wing Front National, Trump's list surely includes France.

Finally, among the sound bites that will be featured in media coverage of the interview, we hear Donald Trump describe NATO as an outdated organization that needs overhaul. However, apart from his reiterated insistence that Member States must pay their fair share, which he claims only Britain and four others from the 28 Member States are currently doing, the interview offers no specifics on what kind structural change, if any, he seeks for NATO. We only hear that NATO has not been prepared to deal with the threat of international terrorism.

Views on Russia

But it was in another area, Trump's remarks on Russia and the terms he named for possibly lifting sanctions, that we find convincing proof that the President-elect's approach to foreign affairs is not just the sum of isolated tactical considerations but a complete reinvention of the guiding principles of U.S. foreign policy. What we are witnessing is a shift to a new strategic, geopolitical paradigm.

In the past couple of decades, going back to the second term of President Bill Clinton, the ideology of neoconservatism with its stress on "democracy promotion" as being the whole of national interest, dictated policy decisions that amounted to the tail wagging the dog. The Baltic States were admitted into NATO in its 2004 enlargement *because they wanted it*. The decision to station U.S., German and other NATO brigades in Poland and other states along the Russian border taken last July in Warsaw and implemented, in the case of Poland, by U.S. forces in the past several days, was justified by *the anxiety of these countries* over the possibility of Russian aggression, even though NATO's action has been highly provocative vis-à-vis Russia and brought the major nuclear powers ever closer to direct confrontation.

In the interview, Trump changed entirely the metrics by which sanctions on Russia would be lifted. Instead of fulfillment of the Minsk Accords over Ukraine's ethnic Russian Donbas region – which nationalist hardliners in Kiev had the power to block – Trump conditioned the relaxation of sanctions on progress in curbing the nuclear arms race and moving toward significant nuclear disarmament, issues that are fully within the power of the Kremlin to implement.

To be sure, these issues today are more complex than they were in the heyday of disarmament talks. The recent obstacles include the U.S. anti-ballistic missile installations in Poland and Romania, the forward stationing of NATO human and materiel resources in the former Warsaw Pact countries, and the standing invitations to Ukraine and Georgia to enter NATO. So any negotiations between Washington and Moscow will be very complex.

But Trump's statement shows that he is focused on the big picture, on the triangular relationship between Washington, Moscow and Beijing that he believes to be of vital importance in keeping the peace globally, rather than on some amorphous reliance on expanding democracy globally on the unproven assumption that democracies among themselves are peace-loving.

These elements in Donald Trump's thinking, quite unexpected in a businessman, bring him very close to the Realism of Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger, while his setting nuclear disarmament as a key goal, aligns him with Ronald Reagan and — strange to say — with Barack Obama at the very start of his presidency.

If Donald Trump can stave off the jackals from the Western mainstream media and the U.S. foreign policy establishment – a combination that has formed a snarling circle around him even before he takes office – he may have a chance to make historic changes in international relations toward a more peaceful world.