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Trump Against the World

By Justin Raimondo
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Donald Trump has a problem – he’s virtually alone. It isn’t just that he strays significantly from his own party’s orthodoxy on major foreign policy questions. His conundrum is that even his own cabinet choices very often depart from the Trumpist canon, a fact that may undermine his ability to actually implement his foreign policy vision.

That vision, in my view, involves unpacking the post-WWII international order and updating it to focus on what Trump believes is the twin dangers to US interests: radical Islamic terrorism, as he puts it, and socioeconomic “carnage” on the domestic front. In order to do that, such institutions as NATO – founded when the old Soviet Union was America’s main adversary on the world stage – must be retooled, or, if necessary, abandoned, in favor of new alliances and structures designed to meet new threats. In Trump’s view, we are stuck in the past, fighting yesterday’s wars while our allies drain our resources and our real enemies go about their business undisturbed.

In terms of specifics, what this translates into is a rapprochement with Russia, which will be recruited into a US-led “anti-terrorist” coalition designed, first of all, to fight and destroy ISIS, and perhaps also to contain China short of war.

In an interview with the *Times* of London and the German newspaper *Bild*, Trump indicated that he envisions a grand bargain with Vladimir Putin: an end to US sanctions and our aggressive

military stance in Europe in exchange for major mutual cuts in our respective nuclear arsenals, perhaps coupled with a Russian guarantee that their “near abroad” is safe from Moscow’s designs. Furthermore, Russia would be transformed from an adversary into a partner in our endless “war on terrorism,” with Trump essentially farming out much of the work involved in subduing and eliminating the ISIS “Caliphate” to Putin and Syrian strongman Bashar al-Assad. This would eliminate the need for US troops on the ground, reducing our role to air support and perhaps the injection of Special Forces to carry out limited tasks.

The US military and national security bureaucracy is implacably opposed to this: that is the source of the CIA’s open hostility to Trump, and the rather crude effort to tie him and his campaign to the Kremlin. Both parties oppose détente – never mind an alliance – with Russia, for any reason whatsoever, although the Trumpian wing of the GOP is moving toward the President on this issue.

Thus we had the spectacle of Marco Rubio demanding that Rex Tillerson condemn Putin as a “war criminal,” which the would-be Secretary of State pointedly refused to do. However, in response to relentless hammering, Tillerson agreed that the US should have reacted to the Russian reacquisition of Crimea with “a proportional show of force,” arming the Ukrainian coup leaders with “defensive” weapons and otherwise “standing up” to the Russian “menace.” Trump, on the other hand, has denied that Ukraine is a vital US interest, and seems likely to reduce if not eliminate US support for Kiev, which was involved in an active effort to deny him the presidency.

The newly-confirmed Secretary of Defense, James “Mad Dog” Mattis, is even worse. Pressed during the hearings to separate himself from Trump, he readily complied:

“Since Yalta, we have a long list of times we’ve tried to engage positively with Russia. We have a relatively short list of successes in that regard. And I think right now, the most important thing is that we recognize the reality of what we deal with, with Mr. Putin, and we recognize that he is trying to break the North Atlantic alliance, and that we take the steps, the integrated steps, diplomatic, economic and military and the alliance steps, the working with our allies, to defend ourselves where we must.”

The invocation of Yalta underscores just how sclerotic the national security bureaucracy has become: they’re still living in the cold war era. And you’ll note that Mattis never enumerates the “long list” of attempts to come to terms with Russia, although one could recall Ronald Reagan’s historic agreement with Mikhail Gorbachev that partially denuclearized Europe and essentially ended the cold war – which is what Trump hopes to achieve or even surpass.

If Mattis thinks there are “a decreasing number of areas” where US and Russian interests align, then he has the complete opposite view of his boss, who clearly thinks it would be “nice if we could get along with Russia” and considers a good relationship with Putin an “asset.”

Another problem is Mike Pompeo, Trump’s pick for CIA director, who averred during his confirmation hearings that Russia is “threatening Europe” and is “doing nothing” to eliminate

ISIS as a factor in the Middle East. I guess all those bombing raids on radical Islamist fighters are just more fake news.

However, it's hard to say that Pompeo and the others disagree with Trump's fundamental deviation from post-WWII US policy, which is that the cold war legacy of seeing Russia as the principal threat is outdated. As the BBC reported, "when asked what was the greatest security threat to the US, [Pompeo] cited terrorism foremost and lumped Russia in behind North Korea and China." This view, however, is still a far cry from what appears to be Trump's position, which is that Russia is a potential ally that needs to be integrated into the international order.

Senator Ron Wyden is currently holding up Pompeo's nomination, on the rather weird grounds that the CIA appointee may want to use information gathered by the Russians against Americans. Yes, that's how far the anti-Russian hysteria has penetrated into the consciousness of the Democratic "resistance." One wonders if Sen. Wyden objects to the Russians' attempt to warn us about the Tsarnaev brothers.

Speaking of anti-Russian hysterics, Pompeo also pledged that he would take pains to support members of the intelligence community who "were afraid there would be political retribution" for the spooks' brazen efforts to undermine Trump's presidency, and promised to "have their backs at every single moment. You have my word on that."

I find this rather hard to believe: will Trump really stand passively by while the "intelligence community" launches a witch-hunt to delegitimize him as a "Russian puppet," as Hillary Clinton put it?

Trump's inaugural address was a fiery challenge to the Establishment – even as they stood around him, he lambasted them for enriching themselves at the expense of the "forgotten man" and vowed to take on the Powers That Be. Yet those same powers are amply represented in his own cabinet choices – especially Mattis, who represents the old guard in the Pentagon.

I think the divide between Trump and his cabinet is a bit overstated, but that doesn't mean it's irrelevant. While the President is no doubt a willful man, there's always the danger that he'll allow himself to be diverted from his own agenda. He's pledged to take so much on in so short a time that even someone with so much energy is bound to get bogged down by relentless opposition from every quarter.

I liken Trump to Chairman Mao during the Cultural Revolution. Convinced that the "bourgeoisie" had infiltrated and taken over the Chinese Communist Party, Mao reached over the heads of the Party and appealed directly to the masses. In a famous wall poster tacked up in Beijing's Tiannanmen Square, Mao directed his followers to "Bombard the Headquarters!" – that is, the headquarters of the Communist Party, where the "capitalist-roaders" were ensconced.

Trump is attempting the same gambit, using the twenty-first century equivalent of the wall poster – his Twitter account. With every political faction in Washington arrayed against him – from the neocons on the right to the left-wing of the Democratic party – Trump must depend on his own

resources, and those of his inner circle, to upend the Establishment and chart a new course for American foreign policy.

Will he be able to do it? I don't know, but what I do know is this: he is aiming for nothing less than a fundamental shift in the course our foreign policy has taken since 1945. The ship of state is a vast and unwieldy vehicle, one that isn't turned around in a day – but I, unlike all too many of my anti-interventionist friends and colleagues, give him credit for trying.

A big part of the problem is that the Trump administration is having major problems filling the thousands of jobs in the national security bureaucracy. The reason is because his revolutionary ideas are abhorred and opposed by the “foreign policy community,” which has a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. Another problem is that many of the anti-interventionist and “realist” scholars and think-tankers who supposedly want to scale down the Empire and bring America home have a personal distaste for the President that overrides their alleged principles.

As Trump would say: Sad! I would say it's disgraceful.