

Trump and Allies in American National Security

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Résumé

Trots nuvarande oroväckande inslag i president Trumps ledarskap finns en del att lära från 1980-talets erfarenheter med Ronald Reagan. Den okonventionella och relativt orutinerade rådgivande kretsen närmast presidenten möts av högljudd och huvudsakligen partipolitisk kritik för sin politik och sina felsteg. Samtidigt har Trump valt mycket erfarna och respekterade medarbetare. Försvarsminister Mattis, utrikesminister Tillerson och den nationella säkerhetsrådgivaren McMaster är starka personer som knappast låter sig överköras av andra, till presidenten närstående personer. Signaler från denna mer rutinerade grupp antyder att Europa och Nato tryggt kan fortsätta att förvänta sig stöd från USA i säkerhetsfrågor så länge européerna utvecklar sina egna militära kapaciteter. Trumps förhandlingsstil inleds oftast med relativt extremt intagna positioner som sedan modereras med tiden och utifrån givna motbud. Om det finns ett område som signifikativt ändrats från förra administrationen så är det frågan om frihandelspolitiken. Måhända ingen stor överraskning efter förra årets valdebatt, men ändå är det ett ämne med täta kopplingar till säkerhet, och ändringar i frågan om frihandel skulle med rätta skapa oro i omvärlden, hos allierade och icke allierade. Presidenten har inte beordrat signifikativa ändringar i den amerikanska militära närvaron i Europa eller omfånget av övningar där. Samarbetet med Finland och Sverige fortsätter att vara starkt och växande, och USA kommer även i fortsättningen att betrakta svensk Natomedlemskap som välkommet.

DONALD TRUMP'S FIRST month as president of the United States revealed, perhaps to no one's surprise, that he is as unconventional a leader as he was an unconventional politician during the 2016 presidential campaign. His blunt language, his appeal to his political "base", his battles with the media and its reportage, and his early morning tweets all have carried over since the November election. Since taking office he has added the intelligence community and the Federal Bureau of Investigation to what former President Nixon once called his "enemies" list. Not surprisingly, the media has fought back hard, publishing unverified leaks that it asserts had their origins in the intelligence community.

The most significant of these leaks and accusations, which has become an ever louder media drumbeat is the accusation that Russia sought to influence the outcome of the election, and did so while maintaining contacts with the candidate's leading advisors—and, his enemies vociferously assert, Mr. Trump himself. Not surprisingly, the most perfervid accusations have come from Democrats, who have yet to come to terms with Ms. Hillary Clinton's electoral defeat. In fact, whatever the Russians might have done, or tried to do, Ms. Clinton has no one but herself to blame. Refusing the advice of her husband—Bill Clinton is probably the most effective politician since Ronald Reagan—she did not campaign in those blue collar states such as

Michigan and Wisconsin, which she subsequently lost, but whose support would have sealed her election victory.

Nevertheless, concern about Russian influence has not been confined to the more extreme elements of the Democratic Party. General Michael Flynn became the first victim of the “Russia connection”, having been forced to resign his post of National Security Advisor after but three weeks in office. He had maintained contact with Russians during the campaign but misled Vice President Mike Pence by asserting he had done no such thing. At the time of this writing, critics of the Administration are calling, in tones that can only be described as shrill, for the resignation of Attorney General Jeff Sessions. They accuse Mr. Sessions of lying to the Congress when he failed to acknowledge a meeting that he held in his Senate office with the Russian Ambassador to the U.S., Sergey Kislyak. Clearly there is no end in sight for the accusations and counter-accusations that have marred the early days of the Trump presidency. Small wonder therefore, that America’s friends and allies, notably those in Europe, wonder whether they have seen the last of American leadership, even as Vladimir Putin’s Russia shows no sign of backing away either from its annexation of Crimea, or its intervention in Eastern Ukraine, or its attempts to influence politicians and election outcomes throughout Europe.

Compounding concerns regarding purported Russian influence in Washington’s high places is the incontrovertible fact that the president’s closest advisors in matters of national security, at least until now, are men who have virtually no expertise in this sphere. Steven Bannon, Mr. Trump’s strategic advisor, now sits on the powerful Principals’ Committee, the Cabinet-level senior interagency forum for considering policy issues that affect the national security interests of

the United States. Traditionally, political advisors have not been permanent members of the committee; nor, for that matter, press reports to the contrary, are the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the director of national intelligence. That Mr. Bannon, who is not shy about his extreme views on matters ranging from trade to immigration, is now a permanent member, is perhaps the most salient, but hardly the only indication of President Trump’s reliance in his inner circle, which includes his young son-in-law, Jared Kushner, and the even younger Stephen Miller, for matters that normally would be the sole province of the National Security Advisor, and the Secretaries of State, Defense, Treasury and Homeland Security.

The complexity that is inherent in national security matters poses a significant challenge to Messrs. Bannon, Kushner, Miller, whose knowledge tends to be a product of briefings and slide shows. For example, none of them has any expertise in the political nuances that govern America’s complex balancing act between Israel and the Arab states, or between India and Pakistan, or between Turkey and America’s Syrian Kurdish allies. None of them has any experience in determining strategic or budgetary priorities, for example, whether to allocate more funds to the maritime services or the Army and Air Force, or between strategic nuclear modernization and conventional force readiness and sustainability. None has dealt with the likes of a president Duterte of the Philippines, or Kim Jong Un, the mad dictator of North Korea. And none has dealt with the challenge of maintaining decent relations with China even while confronting Beijing over its increasingly aggressive posture in the South China Sea.

In contrast to the political troika’s outsize influence in national security affairs, those holding more traditional national

security offices have both the background and temperament to have successful tenures in office. General, now Secretary of Defense, Jim Mattis, is widely respected both in Washington and worldwide as a thoughtful, yet decisive leader. He worked closely with European allies while serving as commander of Allied Command Transformation and with Middle Eastern friends and allies while leading Central Command. His “what you see is what you get” approach has won him the respect and admiration of both Arabs and Israelis, no small feat in that part of the world.

While Rex Tillerson never previously served in government, his responsibilities as chairman of the energy Giant Exxon Mobil brought him into close contact with leaders worldwide. He has dealt with the Russians, and indeed, with Vladimir Putin, but hardly was a Russian poodle. He proved to be a tough negotiator with Moscow’s energy companies, and is likely to do the same in his new role as America’s leading negotiator with foreign governments and leaders.

Given the controversy surrounding General Flynn, both during the election campaign and subsequently, it is worth dealing at some length with the nature and career of his successor, Lieutenant General H.R. McMaster. McMaster has demonstrated great courage both in combat and on the battlefield of ideas. His heroism as a young Captain commanding a troop of 120 soldiers in the Battle of 73 Easting during the 1991 Gulf War has assured his place in military history. McMaster’s E Troop’s dozen tanks destroyed 28 Iraqi Republican Guard tanks, sixteen armored personnel carriers and thirty trucks in the space of but twenty-three minutes. If that were not enough, E Troop then surprised another Iraqi tank company, destroyed eight more tanks, and followed up by destroying 18 more! The battle, and

Captain McMaster’s role, have been memorialized in two books by retired Army Colonel Douglas Macgregor, one of America’s military theorists and historians. The first of these books was devoted entirely to the battle. The most recent volume discusses the battle in terms that its title makes clear: *Margin of Victory: Five Battles that Changed the Face of Modern War*.¹

Upon returning from the war, McMaster earned his doctorate at the University of North Carolina, which he subsequently published as the best-selling *Dereliction of Duty: Johnson, McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies That Led to Vietnam*.² The book castigated the Joint Chiefs of Staff for remaining silent as Johnson misled the American people about the nature and scope of the Vietnam War. It was a remarkable effort by a junior officer, and required considerable courage, since many of the Army’s leading officers had served under the very men he criticized.

McMaster subsequently rewrote military history again—and once again angered many of his superiors—when he successfully retook the Iraqi town of Tel el-Afar from al Qaida in a 2005 operation that became a model of the “clear-hold-build” counterinsurgency strategy that General David Petraeus advocated despite opposition from other senior Army leaders. McMaster then participated, with Petraeus and General Mattis in producing the Army’s revised counterinsurgency manual that drew upon the Tel el Afar experience. He then worked with General Petraeus in Afghanistan, seeking to root out the channels of corruption that have undermined that unhappy country. And he then moved to the Army’s Training and Doctrine Command, where he focused on understanding, analyzing and addressing Russia’s “gray area” operations such as those in Ukraine.

Clearly, General McMaster is unlikely to “kow tow” to Steve Bannon or anyone else who lacks the requisite expertise in national security affairs. Indeed, it is likely that General McMaster made it a condition of his joining the Administration that he would be able to reassign staff, including Mr. Bannon, if he deemed it necessary.³ He will work well with Secretaries Mattis and Tillerson, as well as General Kelly, Secretary of Homeland Security. And he will speak his mind to the President as well, which can only benefit Mr. Trump and help him to avoid missteps or worse.

What should Europeans generally, and Swedes in particular, make of all of these developments? Probably their most effective reaction should be “cautious optimism”. When Vice President Pence, Secretaries Mattis and Kelly, as well as Secretary Tillerson sought to reassure NATO allies that the United States remained committed to the alliance, their soothing tones were met with some skepticism by many who felt that the President himself had said no such thing. As he made clear in his State of the Union address, however, President Trump does indeed stand by the alliance. As he put it, “we strongly support NATO, an alliance forged through the bonds of two World Wars that dethroned fascism, and a Cold War that defeated communism”.⁴

What the President does insist upon, however, is that, again to use his words, “our partners must meet their financial obligations”. In this respect he does not at all differ from President Obama’s similar concern – he upset the allies by calling them “free riders” – or for that matter, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, who made similar pleas while serving as Mr. Obama’s secretary of defense. Indeed, it is arguable that it was precisely because they were disconcerted by Mr. Trump’s skepticism about the value

of alliances whose members have for years avoided paying what he terms their “fair share of the costs” of the common defense that they finally recognized that it was time to “pay up”.

Mr. Trump’s approach toward NATO is a reflection of his more general attitude toward negotiation, particularly in the realm of international security and relations. He tends to stake out an extreme position, see if it will prompt the response he seeks, and modify that position as needed. Thus, for example, he has altered his initial stance regarding the transfer of America’s embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. Similarly, he no longer is as firm about the viability of a “one state solution” of the Israel-Palestine conflict. While he upset Beijing by taking a phone call from President Tsai Ing-wen of Taiwan, he then reconfirmed that the United States would continue to abide by its long standing “One China” policy. Moreover, he has yet to have his Administration declare China a currency manipulator, though he promised to do so soon after he took office. These examples, like his statement regarding NATO, demonstrate that American national security policy has not become untracked. Certainly President Trump will alter many of his predecessor’s positions, regarding Syria for example, or defense spending. But that is standard practice for all incoming presidents, especially when they are from the opposing political party. And not all of what President Trump has said he intends to do will necessarily alienate allies. For example, it was the Obama Administration that angered Canada by refusing to permit work on the Keystone pipeline to proceed. President Trump has reversed that position, much to the appreciation of America’s northern neighbor.

Where the president can be expected to take a sharp turn away from his predecessors is in the realm of trade. As I pointed out

when last addressing the Academy in April 2016, the four remaining candidates for the presidency—Republicans Trump and Ted Cruz, and Democrats Clinton and Bernie Sanders—all opposed the Trans-Partnership Trade Agreement, as well as the North American Free Trade Area. They reflected a belief by large numbers of Americans that their jobs and futures have been imperiled by free trade. Mr. Trump has not reversed himself in this matter. In so doing, he appears to have drawn a line between trade and national security, though in fact the two overlap. In this regard, reading partners, whether allied to the United States or not, have great cause for concern.

Swedes, like most Europeans, have been worried by Washington's constant din regarding Russian influence and about the possibility of a Yalta-like arrangement between Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump. While it is true that Mr. Trump would like to have a positive working relationship with Moscow, he has not given the Russians much confidence that they can somehow wean America away from NATO and Europe. It is not merely the statements by the President and leading Administration officials regarding America's commitment to NATO that gives Moscow pause. It is also the fact that Mr. Trump has not ordered any change in America's rotational deployments to Poland and the Baltic states, to the Navy's exercise schedule in the region, or to the Europe-based missile defense program. He has committed himself to modernizing America's strategic deterrent, which underpins Washington's commitment to NATO. And his plans for expanding America's force structure would enable more troops to deploy to the European theater should the need arise.

It is one thing to capitulate to Russia, it is quite another to reach an agreement with Moscow. Mr. Trump does not appear to be

a man to capitulate on much of anything. But as someone who has made a virtue of "the art of the deal", he recognizes, as the late, great Senator Dan Inouye once told me, "you have to give a little to get a little".

Cooperation between NATO and Sweden – as well as Finland – and both NATO and the United States, continues apace. Indeed, Swedish-American relations are excellent, and are likely to remain that way. Deputy Secretary Bob Work, who continues to serve in the Pentagon, will likely have another meeting with his Nordic counterparts prior to his departure from government; in so doing he will have the full support of Secretary Mattis. There are many areas wherein Washington and Stockholm can further deepen their cooperation: exploring mutual concerns regarding Russian intentions toward Belarus; development in Kaliningrad; examining possible reactions to Russian seizure of a small Estonian island; naval cooperation in light of the constraints on the US Navy due to its shrunken force levels and its worldwide commitments.

At the same time, the United States is unlikely to alter its position regarding Swedish entry into NATO. While America would welcome Swedish membership, it is a decision for Sweden, and only Sweden, to make. At present there is growing support among the Swedish public for membership in NATO, but it is still a subject of much debate and is nowhere near the threshold that would be necessary to ensure widespread support for such a move.

All of the foregoing should reassure Swedes about the regional balance in the Baltic and the High North and American attitudes toward, and cooperation with, Sweden. Mr. Trump is not about to upset the NATO apple cart. He is not about to withdraw America's presence from Europe. Swedes, and other Europeans should not panic.

Thirty six years ago, when Ronald Reagan was elected president, Europeans went into a sustained panic. Given his harsh anti-Communism, further fueled by the USSR's invasion of Afghanistan, they feared that the "cowboy" as many called him, would start World War III. He never did; instead he paved the way both for new nuclear arms agreements with the Soviets, and indeed, for the collapse of the USSR without a shot being fired. The events of the 1980s should serve as a cautionary tale; overheated rhetoric, particularly during election campaigns, and even afterwards, does not inevitably lead

to rash behavior once a president assumes office. Swedes and other Europeans have every reason to be cautious about American behavior. But they have no more reason to panic today than they had in the 1980s; the world did not go up in nuclear smoke at that time, and it is far, very far, from doing so today.

The author was Under Secretary of Defense (2001–2004) and Deputy Under Secretary of Defense (1985–87) and is a Fellow of the Royal Swedish Academy of War Sciences.

Notes

1. Macgregor, Douglas: *Warrior's Rage: The Great Tank Battle of 73 Easting*, Naval Institute Press; Reprint edition, Annapolis, MD 2012; *Margin of Victory: Five Battles that Changed the Face of Modern War*, Naval Institute Press, Annapolis, MD 2016.
2. McMaster, Herbert Raymond "H.R.": *Dereliction of Duty: Johnson, McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies That Led to Vietnam*, Harper Perennial, New York and London 1998.
3. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/donald-trump-would-reconsider-bannons-role-on-national-security-council-if-asked-white-house-says-1487712036> ; <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2017/02/21/donald-trump-steve-bannon-national-security-adviser-br-mcmaster/98208846/>.
4. <http://heavy.com/news/2017/02/read-donald-trump-complete-address-joint-session-congress-full-text-state-of-the-union-transcript-tonight/>.