

The consequences of 'America First' – a poorer, less secure U.S.

By Sean Randolph

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President Trump and first lady Melania Trump arrive in Vantaa, Finland, on July 15, 2018. Trump said in an interview that he considered the European Union a trade foe.

Photo: Doug Mills / New York Times

America First is looking like America Alone. For the United States and the countries around the world that look to it for leadership, the consequences are profound.

We are witnessing the systematic dismantling of the multilateral world order that has given the United States and its partners an extraordinary level of security and prosperity since World War II.

Alliances in Asia and Europe have been questioned, the United States has withdrawn from the Paris climate accord, and the Iran nuclear agreement has been scrapped. These departures have occurred despite the urging of virtually all our global partners to remain.

On the trade front, agreements have been abandoned and tariffs imposed on trading partners. In a short period of time, the United States has withdrawn from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, threatened to withdraw from NAFTA and the U.S.-Korea Free Trade Agreement, offended its closest allies at the G-7 meeting in Ottawa, and described the European Union as a "foe." Steel and aluminum tariffs have been imposed on allies in the name of national security, and tariffs on automobile imports are being threatened under the same thin cover. And at a time when the United States should be rallying its friends to push back against Chinese mercantilism, it isn't and instead has challenged China to a trade war. For anyone who has doubts about the wisdom of all this, the president tells us that it's easy to win trade wars and that tariffs are "beautiful."

Perhaps a tougher U.S. negotiating stance is needed. A harder line with China on technology issues is overdue, increased European commitments to NATO has been a topic for years, and few would argue with the idea of updating the North American Free Trade Agreement. What is happening, however, goes beyond negotiating tactics.

Messaging is important. While the president portrays the United States as a victim of unfair agreements and predatory activity by its partners, the agreements he describes were designed and written by the United States — for our benefit (and of course, for our partners' benefit). We are not the victims — we are the authors.

There are two upshots:

One is that a leadership void has been created that Russia and China are happy to fill — China through its Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, a Chinese-led alternative to the Trans-Pacific Partnership (of which it was not a member).

The other is that partners are going their own way. European leaders are publicly questioning the reliability of the United States as a security partner. Led by Japan and Canada, the 11 other signatories to the Trans-Pacific Partnership are moving forward without the United States. Japan and Canada have both concluded free trade agreements with the European Union. And the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership is taking hold in Asia: Southeast Asia is poised to join, and while Japan might consider a bilateral free trade agreement with the United States, it won't do so before the ink is dry on its own membership in the China-led partnership. In all these scenarios, U.S. companies lose.

The United States, with its businesses and workers, has been a net beneficiary of international trade and the agreements we created. It is easier to tear something down than to build something up — as we and our allies have painstakingly done with trade for more than 70 years. A transactional approach that equates trade agreements to buying and selling commercial buildings trivializes trade's significance and the relationships that underlie it. Bludgeoning trade partners into submission may play to the gallery in the short term, but undermines our strategic relationships in the long term. Truly great Republican leaders such as Ronald Reagan understood this and prevailed against the Soviet Union by playing hardball, but also by strengthening alliances and projecting American values.

These are existential issues for the United States. Republicans should assert and fight for the principles for which their party has long stood — a strong defense, open markets and fiscal prudence. Democrats should work with them. And voters must consider whether the world that is being created today, where values are an afterthought and allies are advised to go their own way even as global challenges grow, is one where they and their children will be safer.

The late U.S. Sen. John McCain understood this clearly, as do the Americans who mourn his loss. This is a time to reflect on what he represented and how far our current leadership has strayed.

America Alone will not be more secure or richer. Without moral authority and willing partners, it will be weaker and, despite its current economic strength, in the long run it will be more vulnerable.

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