

Note to US allies: America First is here to stay and you're not second by David Santoro

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A single question has haunted US allies since President Donald Trump unveiled his “America-First” foreign policy: Where do we rank?

It's a fair question, to which the answer seems to be: Not higher than any other country.

During the 2016 presidential election campaign, candidate Trump gave allies reasons to think that they were not on the list of US priorities. He [accused them](#) of not paying enough for defense and suggested that America should pull its forces from Europe and Asia and condition US defense upon them fulfilling their obligations. He called NATO “[obsolete](#)” because it did not sufficiently focus on counterterrorism and said that he could tolerate other US allies, including Japan, South Korea, and Saudi Arabia, [developing nuclear weapons](#) in lieu of US protection. And he ran on a [protectionist platform](#), arguing that free trade benefits China and Mexico and allies such as Japan, Germany, or Canada over the United States.

Candidate Trump also did not hide his affinity for strongman Russian President Vladimir Putin, saying that he would probably [“get along very well with him”](#) and that he would seek to engage him, notably to fight the self-proclaimed Islamic State in Syria. He [suggested](#) that he could recognize Crimea, which Moscow annexed in March 2014, as a Russian territory and lift sanctions against Russia, despite Moscow's alleged ongoing interference in [eastern Ukraine](#) and [worries among NATO allies](#) that this could embolden Putin to challenge them next.

Since he took office, however, President Trump has adjusted his positions. While continuing to call for more burden-sharing from allies, he and his team have reassured them that Washington will honor its defense commitments. Trump stated that NATO was [“no longer obsolete”](#) and that he would [attend the NATO leaders' meeting](#) later this month, [taking credit](#) for NATO's growing defense spending and enhanced counterterrorism efforts (even though these efforts reflect mostly [Alliance decisions](#) made after the deterioration of the European security environment in 2014). During visits to Europe, Vice President Mike Pence and Secretaries of Defense and State Jim Mattis and Rex Tillerson added that the US commitment to NATO is [“unwavering,” “full,”](#) and [“strong.”](#)

In addressing the North Korean nuclear crisis, Team Trump also reaffirmed the US commitment to nonproliferation

and to the defense of its Asian allies; in Seoul, for instance, Vice President Pence assured South Korea that the United States is [“with you 100 percent.”](#) And, while [withdrawing from the Trans-Pacific Partnership](#), Trump moderated his anti-free trade stance, backing away from labeling China a currency manipulator ([a campaign pledge](#)) and from terminating the North American Free Trade Agreement [“at this time.”](#)

Moreover, the Trump administration has not sought a reset with Russia. Sanctions are still in place and, as Secretary Tillerson has [pointed out](#), they “will remain until Moscow reverses the actions that triggered [them].” Despite cooperation attempts, Washington and Moscow also remain [at odds](#) on Syria, especially after the US bombing of an air base used by the Syrian and Russian militaries. That has led Trump to confess that the United States was [“not getting along with Russia at all”](#) and that relations [“may be at an all-time low.”](#)

Adjustments were unavoidable. Governing is different from campaigning. Once in power all US presidents quickly realize that there are forces compelling them to revise their original intentions. Trump is no exception. Administration officials favoring a more mainstream and pro-alliance foreign policy may have also [gained influence](#) after the ousting of America-First partisans Michael Flynn and Steve Bannon from the National Security Council.

But US allies should make no mistake: under Trump America First will remain alive and well because the president's worldview is deeply rooted and has been [consistent for years](#). According to him, the United States is operating in a highly competitive, winner-take-all international environment. It has no permanent allies or irredeemable adversaries, only states with which it will clash or cooperate at a point in time, depending on US security and economic interests of the moment. This zero-sum approach to international relations means that there is no longer a US commitment to defend and promote the liberal international order that Washington built and anchored after World War II and there is no longer a US promise to extend priority status or special treatment to allies. This approach also abandons traditional US support for human rights and democracy and relegates multilateral institutions and legal regimes to the sidelines because they are deemed to decrease US freedom of action. Instead, the cornerstone of US foreign policy is bilateral relations and a simple operating principle that applies to *all* states: “What can you do for us now?”

That's why even as the North Korean nuclear crisis is heating up, Trump felt no qualms demanding that South Korea (the US ally most exposed to Pyongyang's firepower) should pay for the deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense ([THAAD](#)) anti-missile system on its territory. And he

added that he intends to renegotiate the [US-Korea Free Trade Agreement](#), which he considers unfair to the United States.

In theory, Trump's approach also suggests that Washington could prioritize relations with Russia or China over or at the expense of allies, which, in the worst-case scenario, it could decide to abandon. That hasn't happened yet, but it is a possibility. Consider Trump's recent statement about Taiwan: [when asked](#) if he would again speak with Taiwanese leader Tsai Ing-wen, he said that he would first want to talk to Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping to ensure that the United States would retain China's support to rein in North Korea. That equates to giving Beijing a veto over the US relationship with Taiwan, a longstanding security partner, in exchange for cooperation on North Korea.

To be sure, many of Trump's impulses have been and will be corrected, including by members of his own administration. National Security Adviser Gen. H.R. McMaster, for instance, was [quick to contradict the President](#) and reassure South Koreans that the United States would, as planned, pay for THAAD. For good reasons: the system will primarily protect US forces in the region.

America First, however, will continue to shape the contours of US foreign policy because a "follow-the-leader" mentality will likely develop. Significantly, in a reversal of traditional US policy, McMaster recently [seemed to have suggested](#) that the United States may not defend South Korea against the North if it appeared that the US homeland can be hit by North Korean missiles because "What the president has first and foremost on his mind is to protect the American people."

What, in these circumstances, can allies do? To stay in Washington's good books and keep the United States on their side, they can explain and improve what they bring to the table, individually or collectively, and stress how it is benefiting the United States. This would be the best-case scenario and would address the administration's (fair) criticisms that alliances have been ["out of balance"](#) for too long.

While some allies will certainly do that, others will be tempted to look elsewhere and create new security partnerships or arrangements. [The Philippines](#), for instance, has been cozying up to China (and Russia), while maintaining ties with Washington. Fundamental questions regarding the value of the US alliance have also been raised in [Australia](#) and, in Europe, some have proposed development of a [European Union nuclear arsenal](#) to protect the postwar regional order that Washington may no longer want to defend.

America First will transform US alliances. The question is not if, but how and how much.

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