Risks of Trump’s ‘Winning’ Obsession

Donald Trump’s more pragmatic approach to foreign policy may be an improvement over the recent ideological obsessions but his own obsession with “winning” could cause trouble, says ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

A slogan from the sports world—“winning isn’t everything; it’s the only thing” — which usually is associated with Vince Lombardi, although he probably got it from another football coach, has always had a vacuous quality. It sounds like an attempt to make a contrast where there isn’t really a contrast. What meaningful difference is there between “everything” and “only thing”?

But if there is any semantic substance to the phrase, maybe it has to do with winning as a pure, abstract value in its own right, separate from anything about the specific endeavor that was the vehicle for one contestant winning and another one losing. Winning per se is seen as the only thing that matters because everything else about the game that was played and won doesn’t matter. And in the sports world, this begins to make sense; the activity is just a game, and it really doesn’t matter in the larger course of human events.

Apply this frame of mind to more consequential endeavors, however, and the implications are more disturbing. In this regard, consider the incoming U.S. president and what we know, and don’t know, about his outlook on foreign policy. Despite the earnest and usually sincere efforts by many commentators to discern pattern, direction, and purpose amid Donald Trump’s tweets and other utterances, the dominant picture is still one of inconsistencies, contradictions, slogans, and lack of a record. We are, late in the transition period, still mostly flying blind regarding the actual future foreign policy of this new presidency. We have little idea of what Trump really cares about in the substance of U.S. foreign policy, as distinct from rhetoric that has worked in a campaign and that helps in his effort to portray himself as a populist.

We do know, however, that Trump cares a lot about winning — or more precisely, about being seen as a winner. He constantly returns to the framework of “winners” and “losers” as his way of identifying what is good and bad and what matters to him. His repeated stress on associating himself with the biggest or best or most successful whatever is part of making sure that he is always seen as a winner. And on November 8th he registered the biggest win that any individual could. The slogan about winning being the only thing does appear to apply to Donald Trump and to what drives him.
The Drawback of ‘Winning’

There are many drawbacks in applying to foreign policy an outlook that is more appropriate to sports, but one set of drawbacks is suggested in a perceptive piece by Mark Katz about prospects for U.S.-Russian relations in the Trump administration. Katz observes that the principal demands that Vladimir Putin is likely to make as conditions for an improved relationship are ones that Trump would have good reason to agree to.

Accept the Russian annexation of Crimea? It’s a fait accompli that is not going to be reversed anyway. Lift Ukraine-related sanctions on Russia? The sanctions are bad for business. Promise that none of the former Soviet republics apart from the Baltic states will join NATO or the European Union? The Europeans don’t want them as members. Accept continuation of a Russian-allied Assad regime in Damascus? The jihadist alternatives are even worse.

Although Katz doesn’t say so, these are valid reasons and low-cost ways for not just Trump but any U.S. president to accept much of what Putin wants in the interest of a better relationship that would have benefits for the United States. The problem, as Katz points out, is that Trump cannot be perceived as caving in to Putin. He has to be seen instead as having wrung concessions from Putin, and preferably as having gotten the better of him. Katz emphasizes that Trump especially must be seen doing so in the eyes of a domestic audience that includes hawkish, anti-Russian Congressional Republicans. Trump has the added baggage of the alleged Russian hacking and interference in the U.S. election; any favorable move he makes toward Putin risks being interpreted as payback for election favors.

On top of this is Trump’s personal fixation about winning. He will feel a need to get Putin to back down on some of his demands not only to satisfy John McCain and Lindsey Graham but to satisfy himself that he can tout himself as having “won” a negotiation. The result may be that potential trades and understandings that could serve both U.S. and Russian interests will be forgone.

The general point that Trump is ill-disposed to understand and accept is that what best serves U.S. interests is not always easily recognized or defined as a “win”. The most effective diplomacy yields agreements that both sides can honestly describe as successes. The sort of foreign government behavior most likely to serve U.S. interests over the long term is what the foreign government perceives to serve its own long-term interests, rather than being a concession that was wrung out of it and that it will seek the first opportunity to reverse.

Complications for Trump
The issues of election interference and Trump’s professed admiration for Putin make relations with Russia an especially delicate case, but the impulse to win is likely to complicate other negotiations and relationships as well. This may be the case with China, as suggested by Trump already trying to put the one-China policy in play.

Most of this mistake probably can be attributed to naïveté, and specifically to a failure to understand how the Taiwan issue figures in Chinese thinking, regardless of how justified or unjustified that thinking is to us. But it may also be an early indication, along with Trump’s mercantilist approach to trade and outdated perceptions of such things as currency manipulation and job losses, of approaching the entire U.S.-Chinese relationship in win-loss terms.

Another case is Iran, where there already is a recent important deal in the form of the agreement that limits Iran’s nuclear program. Here Trump’s self-promoted image as the man who can reach better deals than anyone else fits with the existing Republican Party mantra that we should have gotten a “better deal” with Iran.

All of this ignores the long and laborious negotiating history of this agreement, what the Iranians have given up, and the nonproliferation objectives achieved. A quixotic attempt to reach some alternative that could better be described as a “win” — even though it would not move Iran any farther away from a nuclear weapon than it already is, nor advance any other U.S. interests — risks destroying the very important benefits of the existing agreement.

Notwithstanding Trump’s trumpeting of his skills as a deal-maker, and notwithstanding all that has been said and written about the “transactional” approach this businessman is likely to take toward foreign policy, a man with his mindset is not about to operate in his new job the way he did in his old one. As head of a privately-owned business, profits and losses could be kept private — and with his refusal to make his tax returns public, they are largely staying that way. The public side of the business could be limited to his promotion of himself and his brand, with bragging about having the most luxurious buildings or the best golf courses.

Now the game has changed for him. The public perception of gains and losses is different. If Trump really were to approach foreign relations in a pragmatic, businesslike way, that in general would be good for U.S. interests. But probably his need to be seen to “win” will get in the way. When winning is the only thing for the chief executive, that is not so good for the country.

Paul R. Pillar, in his 28 years at the Central Intelligence Agency, rose to be one of the agency’s top analysts. He is author most recently of Why America
Misunderstands the World. (This article first appeared as a blog post at The National Interest’s Web site. Reprinted with author’s permission.)