Taming or Tiptoeing Around Trump

Donald Trump’s emotional shortcomings and lack of knowledge about the world have forced nations to adopt new strategies for maneuvering around the increasingly erratic U.S. superpower, writes Michael Brenner.

By Michael Brenner

The Trump presidency presents a unique challenge to other governments. Never before in modern times has a major power, much less the world’s paramount power, been led by so erratic and unbalanced an individual. His total lack of experience, knowledge and interest in anything beyond narcissistic self-promotion compounds the problem of figuring out how to deal with him. Understandably – friend, foe and neutral find themselves equally perplexed.

As they grope for a strategic response, we are beginning to see the vague outlines of three types of approaches. The first is predicated on the proposition that Trump’s mind is vacant – it’s terra incognita to be explored, so let’s try to colonize it. This in effect is the approach taken by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Mohammed bin-Salman (MBS), the Saudi Crown Prince and power behind the throne in Riyadh. Each hurried to Washington, elbowing his way to the head of the queue with the intention of imprinting on Trump’s brain their preferred cognitive map of the world – most especially the Middle East.

The principal features that they worked at etching on his grey matter were these: Israel/Saudi Arabia is your trustworthy ally who is the key to bringing order to the region in a way that will protect the United States. Israel/Saudi Arabia had proven itself trustworthy and dedicated over the decades. We are anchors of stability in an unruly Middle East.

That is why we were offended by the shabby treatment we received from Barack Obama. No gratitude or understanding of our vulnerable position. We are under threat from an aggressive Iran above all. Those diabolical mullahs have mounted campaigns against America as well as us on every front: Syria, Yemen, Iraq, Lebanon, Bahrain, Libya. They are surrounding us. Yet, Obama coddled the mullahs. He let them off the hook with that weak nuclear deal and his repeated appeals for dialogue. That’s outright appeasement.

The focal points are nicely chosen. Trump has made a major issue of the “catastrophic” nuclear treaty – threatening to rescind it. He’s tightening the screws on sanctions. Iran is his G-spot on all matters Middle Eastern. It inflames the nerve ends still quivering from the recurrent stimulation of
terrorism. Linking the two has been recurrent method for playing on the taut strings of the American body politic.

For the Israelis and Saudis, this point of concentration provides a beachhead onto the Trumpian mind that can flare out to other sensitive spots already identified: Russia, unleashing the American military to conform to his chest-thumping rhetoric — e.g. the Tomahawk attacks in Syria, and feeding the national appetite for violent action. The fact that Jerusalem and Riyadh are working in tandem these days adds a nice synergistic touch to the campaign.

The Marx Brothers Syndrome

A second approach toward dealing with Trump emphasizes nimbleness and improvisation. Its point of departure is that there is no way of knowing what will emanate from the White House since Trump himself doesn’t know. Its inner workings evoke images of the Marx Brothers in A Night At The Opera.

Coping strategies for managing in an environment of high uncertainty come down to three options. One is to disengage. Since I can’t figure out what is happening, and certainly have no idea as to what might happen tomorrow, avoidance is the safest course of non-action. Of course, some governments will find that easier than others.

Vanuatu, Lesotho and most other tiny nations are essentially bystanders to world events. Control over their own fate is minimal in the best of times. So, their diplomats can just chill out — amuse themselves perusing The New York Times’ funny pages while sipping a cappuccino. Some others don’t have that luxury and/or will not admit to themselves that functionally they are little different from the micro-states. Western Europeans and Japan fall into this category.

In theory, they could follow the other two methods for dealing with their Trump predicament whose hallmark are tumult and uncertainty. Increase your ability to foresee by acquiring better access to information OR process more effectively the information you have. The former is precluded by the mental vacuity noted earlier. The latter is liable to result in the stripping of mental gears as the intellectual machine cannot operate without lubricating oil and the nourishment of information.

The last alternative is to gain more leverage over policy-making in Washington. However, it is unrealistic to attempt an imitation of the Israelis or Saudis. No other governments have the access, the status or the tools to insert themselves into the turbid world of Trump and his White House. In truth, they don’t have the audacity either.

The situation of the Europeans is complicated by the awkwardness of having to
maneuver simultaneously as national governments and as participants in the institutional mechanism of the European Union. The E.U. is both an opportunity to augment power through concertation and a readily available device for avoiding taking risky actions. The latter invariably prevails in relations with the overweening United States.

The Europeans do a few things extremely well: talking and holding meetings. The instinctive, habitual response to crisis or challenge is to add to the already weighty meeting schedule and to form task forces. In these activities, they surpass even the practices of American universities – no small feat.

As one Old World cynic has wearily opined: “the Americans fight pointless wars; we hold pointless meetings. Who’s the wiser?”

Tiptoeing Carefully

Consequently, European governments (and likewise Japan for some similar and some different reasons) have been largely inert in front of the Trump dilemma. British Prime Minister Theresa May did dash to Washington (actually beating out both Netanyahu and MBS) to ingratiate herself with the new jefe in the White House. Her keenness to declare herself the leading member of the groupie gang was animated by the fanciful idea that the U.S. somehow could save her and Britain from the full consequences of the Brexit folly. Other European leaders held back until they could summon the courage to come within reach of his grasp and expect to return safely home.

The particularities of the fraught issues at the top of everyone’s crisis list have been an additional inhibiting factor. In the Middle East, all the allies have signed on to the American formulation of the Syrian war – and its foundation stone: currying favor with the Saudis and Israel. They have joined Washington, with varying degrees of enthusiasm and conviction, in stigmatizing the Assad regime as the source of all that has befallen the country. They have called for his ouster as the sine qua non for moving toward a resolution, they refrain from uttering a word of criticism at Turkey (which at any moment can reopen the refugee flood gates), Saudi Arabia and Qatar for their crucial backing of ISIS and of Al Qaeda in Syria (whose very existence they deny in echoing the American line) and express an aversion to engaging earnestly with the Russians in the search for a way out.

Trump’s sudden acknowledgement that Assad was likely to stay in Damascus was reversed so quickly as to spare them the headache of agreeing, disagreeing or explaining. Indeed, nearly the entire European political class is emulating its American counterparts in ignoring the cardinal truth about Syria: either Assad stays around or the jihadis will rule Syria.
Surpassing even Syria as a combustible problem, and with grave implications, is Ukraine. Here, there were discernible differences between the major Western European powers and the U.S. While condemnation of Vladimir Putin’s annexation of Crimea was shared, Germany’s Angela Merkel and France’s Francois Hollande were equivocal about moving toward a confrontation with Russia. (Even more uneasy was Premier Matteo Renzi of Italy). They dragged their heels over full-spectrum sanctions, and lent mainly silent support to the NATO build-up that brought Western forces to the Russian border.

Most important, the pair took the initiative in brokering the Minsk I and Minsk II accords that sought to lay the basis for a Russo-Ukrainian peaceful freezing of the crisis. It has been the Petro Poroshenko government in Kiev that has stymied the plan by its failure to meet any of the main conditions regarding: constitutional changes, disengagement of troops, and planned referenda. The Obama administration refusal to pressure Kiev emboldened Poroshenko who anyway has been under enormous pressure from the ultra-nationalists who hold his fragile government hostage.

Merkel and Hollande issued a few tame words of concern and then abandoned the diplomatic field to Washington. They also began to echo the American denouncement of Putin as a reckless adventurer and threat to continental peace.

When Trump shifted the rhetoric regarding both the man and the country, neither jumped in to second him or to encourage him. Hence, as his administration has moved the U.S. back into a more hostile position, they have kept the same low profile. Of course, there were other factors in the equation: elections were on tap in both countries, the immigration crisis sucked up all the political oxygen, and terrorism had taken over the headlines. Hollande soon was on the way to oblivion, and Merkel vulnerable.

Turkey’s Own Wild Card

As for the Turks, they are on their own, irregular course. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is as erratic and feckless as Trump. He does know what he wants – but he can’t get there without squaring circles and fitting square pegs into round holes. Hence, tactics are constantly changing.

The Sultan’s ambition has been to create a facsimile of the Ottoman Empire in the Middle East. That means grabbing the northern part of Syria along with Mosul in Iraq while being acknowledged as the Guide by the Sunni Arabs. Toward that fantastic end, he has encouraged and succored the Takfiris: both ISIS and al-Qaeda/al-Nusra & Assoc. They could not have organized and sustained themselves as they have without crucial Turkish support on Turkish territory. The parlous scheme totally unraveled when the Russians entered the fray.
Erdogan still wants to be the power broker in post-war Syria. And above all, he is desperate to block the Kurds’ move to dominate the Syrian-Turkish borderlands. A weakening hand means that he constantly comes up with new maneuvers – trying to play all parties. To date, his greatest accomplishment is to alienate just about everyone and to isolate Turkey. What does that imply for Erdogan’s approach toward Trump?

Erdogan gives the impression of being so puzzled by Trump that he has given up any effort to discern the White House’s plans or to anticipate its actions. Anyway, so wrapped is he in his own convoluted strategizing that he finds it hard, if not unnatural, to take the bearings of another statesman – even a sober one. That is evident in his erratic dealings with Putin, the Iranians, the Saudis, and the ISIS leadership who are now as much threat as surrogate.

In other words, an implicit abstention from clever machinations aimed at influencing Trump’s attitudes. Instead, he will press ahead with his own initiatives regardless – even if that risks conflict with Washington over the aggressive role of the YPG Kurds around Raqqa.

A Clash of Egomania

What will happen when these two ego-maniacal, impulsive men encounter each other next Tuesday in Washington? Will Erdogan insult Trump with charges that the CIA was behind last year’s abortive coup? Will he insist that the U.S. hand over Fethullah Gülen – or else? Does he hope to force a trade of curbing the Kurds in exchange for continued access to Incirlik airbase?

How will Trump react? Will he back off this past week’s pledge to arm the Kurds in the teeth of Erdogan’s denunciations? Will he silently accept humiliation as Defense Secretary (retired General) James Mattis did a few weeks ago in Ankara in the face of a Turkish harangue – or throw a tantrum? If a tantrum, will it come during or after the meeting?

More likely, they will reach a quiet understanding whereby the Americans pledge to rein in the Kurds once ISIS is disposed of. Such an arrangement would not trouble the Iraqi Kurdistan Region whose President, Masoud Barzani, heads the Kurdistan Democratic Party (PDP) which has a long-standing rivalry with the PKK/YPG. Moreover, Barzani profits from a commercial partnership with Turkey that provides an economic lifeline for the landlocked region. As for Turkish sponsorship of the Takfiris other than ISIS, it will continue. Washington will continue to find it convenient to ignore since these selfsame groups have been America’s own tacit allies. In a dialogue of the blind and the deaf, it matters nothing that Erdogan and Trump speak the same unintelligible language.
The Third Alternative

Brain sculpting a la Jerusalem and Riyadh is a restricted patent. Passivity is not viable for countries that have big stakes in the global order and a combination of means and ambition to take an interest in shaping it. That means Russia and China. They have had to find a different way.

Moscow harbored hopes that Trump would deviate from the course of implacable hostility followed by Obama and marked out by Hillary, too. Given her brutal language, including a direct comparison of Putin to Hitler, Russia had good reason to prefer the alternative. Too realistic to reach the facile judgment that Trump had actually thought through alternative policies and had chosen the wiser course, they did interpret the consistency of his words as inclining toward accommodation and pragmatic cooperation. Putin’s likely hope was that a pattern of business-like dialogue could be opened, grounded on the principles of: a recognition of Russia’s legitimate concerns (in Europe) and its interests (in the Middle East); an appreciation that Moscow and Washington had convergent interests in countering Islamic terrorism and in the stabilization of world energy markets; and a sober restraint in pressing a values agenda that had proven dangerously destabilizing.

A multilateral diplomacy guided by that sort of low-key realism long has been Putin’s goal. He has articulated it on multiple occasions with rare candor and specificity. Washington, and Western leaders generally, seem never to have paid it any attention – assuming that they have read them.

The White House’s newfound tack in the direction of antagonism and confrontation creates a quandary for Moscow. They will not yield – as demanded by Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and Trump’s phalanx of generals – or bow to American suzerainty. Instead, they will hold fast, temporize, make practical proposals such as the no-conflict zones in Syria – and keep their fingers crossed that Trump is not pushed into doing something fatally stupid.

In the longer run, there is always the possibility that the political winds whistling through the desolate open spaces of Trump’s mind might uncover a small oasis of sanity in the mental wilderness, and clarify a vision of the world that permits the sort of engagement they’d prefer.

China’s Long View

China is in analogous position – with some cardinal differences. For one, there are no ominous flashpoints where friction between the two powers runs the risk of leading to open conflict. No counterpart of Ukraine; no proxy fights as in Syria. Disputes over the contested, energy-rich isles in the South China Sea may
raise blood pressure, may stir the planners to game great air-sea battles a la WW II, may prompt the New York Times to publish half-a-dozen stories a week highlighting China's alleged deep-seated problems (a classic case of projection cum sublimation). But no one is going to war in the nuclear age over spits of sand.

Moreover, Washington and Beijing share a genuine worry about North Korea. Each recognizes that it must coordinate with the other in order to neutralize the danger. As for Taiwan, Trump’s misstep was quickly corrected when Beijing coolly reminded him that such a thing as history exists and that he does not operate in a world environment that accommodates his unbridled exercise of free will.

In the economic realm, the logic of interdependence is overwhelming. Commercial cum financial wars would ruin both countries. China’s possession of $1.5 trillion in U.S. Treasury notes and America’s vast market for Chinese goods creates the economic parallel to a condition of Mutual Assured Destruction. In addressing specific, nettlesome issues like the Trump charge of Chinese currency manipulation or restrictions on American companies in China, Xi et al will prove as tough yet calculating as any businessman Trump or his Goldman Sachs advisers have met.

The Chinese have the advantages of knowing exactly what they want, the confidence that they will reach their objectives, and the savviness to play the game. Above all, they know that time is on their side – so patience is in order.

Moreover, the Chinese leaders are dexterous. That was evident at Xi’s meeting with Trump in Florida. Unlike many others (in the U.S. and abroad), the Chinese seem to have understood that Trump was an empty-headed ignoramus. His bombast was taken as a sign of immaturity. So, too, was his party trick of employing a chocolate cake to highlight the Tomahawk attack. They are aware that he is allergic to hard thinking. They know that his narcissistic ego prevents him from relying on truly able people to whom he might cede authority. To them, he is the quintessential barbarian – the kind of barbarian they’ve been handling for more than 2,000 years. A Yi with nuclear weapons.

They will play in and on his mind. Not in the blunt manner of Netanyahu and MBS. Their approach will be subtler. Honor him by sharing things that a man of his strength and power should know: e.g. Korean history a la Chinoise. Humor him but don’t defer to him. Habituate him to the mores of mutual respect. Don’t make threats, or even issue prophecies; rather nudge him toward the apprehension of wisdom that he believes is his own revelation. Massage his dispositions and inclinations rather than instruct – knowing all along who will earn the Mandate of Heaven. For Trump marks the ordained descent of the United States.
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