

The Death Knell for America's Global Leadership

In an op-ed, the Trump administration's "adults in the room" envision America in the image of its leader: selfish, isolated, brutish, domineering, and driven by immediate appetites rather than ideals or even longer-term interests.



President Donald Trump sits with his delegation, including National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster and Secretary of Defense James Mattis during a meeting at the EU.

Jonathan Ernst / Reuters

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H.R. McMaster and Gary Cohn may not be the most influential people in the Trump White House. But the national-security adviser and the director of the National Economic Council are surely the White House's most presentable faces. When they sign their names to a statement of Trumpism at its most dangerous, we are warned: The so-called adults in the room are shirking their responsibilities.

On Tuesday, *The Wall Street Journal* published an op-ed bearing McMaster's and Cohn's names. It's a good guess they did not actually write very much of it. However, they now own it—and the United States must bear the consequences.

The op-ed originates as an attempt to tell a story of success about Donald Trump's catastrophic first trip abroad. During that trip the president spoke at the dedication of a monument to NATO's Article 5 pledge of mutual defense—but notably omitted to endorse Article 5 itself. That omission was heard loud and clear. Its power was only amplified by the shadowy Russian connections of Donald Trump, his family, and his entourage. In private meetings, NATO leaders were dismayed by Trump's behavior and bearing, so much so that the ultra-cautious chancellor of Germany declared in a major speech shortly after Trump's departure that Europeans could no longer completely rely on the United States. Her chief political opponent in autumn elections agreed with her, and went further, comparing Donald Trump to an authoritarian leader.

So that's the pig on which McMaster and Cohn tried to put lipstick. How'd they do it?

First step is the Trump administration's fail-safe response to embarrassment: untruth.

As the president stated in Brussels, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization is rooted in “the courage of our people, the strength of our resolve, and the commitments that bind us together as one.”

While reconfirming America's commitment to NATO and Article 5 ...

This did not happen. You'll find [here](#) examples of statements by President Bush and Obama that illustrate actual commitments to Article 5. Trump quite visibly veered away from saying anything like that. More to the point—since language is judged by what it communicates—none of his European hearers *believe* that he said it.

In any event, the *WSJ* op-ed confirms: He did not mean it.

Here is a key passage:

The president embarked on his first foreign trip with a clear-eyed outlook that the world is not a “global community” but an arena where nations, nongovernmental actors, and businesses engage and compete for advantage. We bring to this forum unmatched military, political, economic, cultural, and moral strength. Rather than deny this elemental nature of international affairs, we embrace it.

This passage purports merely to describe. But in reality, it is recommending—and recommending something incompatible with American leadership. The United States leads an alliance of other wealthy and powerful states. Italy alone has an economy equal in size to Russia's. This alliance defers to American leadership, to the extent that it does, because it trusts that leadership to be exercised with a view to something bigger than the selfish interests of the United States.

Since 1945, American leaders have based policy on two facts: a zone of cooperation encompassing democratic, rule-of-law states; a zone of completion between the group of democracies and other groups on this planet. Within the zone of cooperation, the usual frictions and disagreements of international life were to be managed by rules, especially trade rules, adjudicated by neutral arbiters. The ultimate expression of national power—military force—would be put utterly beyond the realm of things to be contemplated. But even such less-extreme manifestations of sovereignty as intelligence gathering would be done collectively, as if in this area the five closest democracies—the U.S., the U.K., Canada, Australia, and New Zealand—almost formed one government.

The national egoism that had inflicted so much suffering before 1945 would be suppressed on a new vision in which international politics would come to look more and more like domestic politics.

This vision was not always achieved of course. There were and are many disputes even between friends. But the theory of the case was that within the democratic world, cross-border cooperation would be regarded as the norm and

the ideal; state-versus-state competition would be abnormal and unwelcome. All established democracies at least formally committed themselves to trade regimes based on the principle of gains from exchange.

This is the vision that the Cohn/McMaster op-ed rejects.

The rejection adds a sinister tint to these words:

At every stop in our journey, we delivered a clear message to our friends and partners: Where our interests align, we are open to working together to solve problems and explore opportunities. We let adversaries know that we will not only take their measure, deter conflict through strength, and defend our interests and values, but also look for areas of common interest that allow us to work together. In short, those societies that share our interests will find no friend more steadfast than the United States. Those that choose to challenge our interests will encounter the firmest resolve.

There's a lot to unpack here, and none of it is good.

First, those bold words about defending “interests and values” against adversaries sound ill in the mouth of administration officials who may owe their high offices in some degree to the clandestine assistance of a foreign adversary. So long as Russia's attack on U.S. democracy in 2016 goes not only unpunished—but actively denied—by the Trump administration, they have no standing for this kind of robust language.

But they may attach a private meaning to that language. Trump himself and some of those who influence him pretty obviously regard the European Union, not Russia, as their most **important adversary**. Donald Trump has consistently refused to recognize even the existence of the EU, vainly **attempting to negotiate** trade agreements with individual member nations, despite their treaty obligations to each other. You can mark that attempt to Trump's ignorance if you

like, but according to German reports, Cohn himself—the former COO and president of Goldman Sachs!—tried the same gambit on the president's trip.*

But here is the truest tell. You can have friends. Or you can have people you work with only when your immediate interests align. Those are not the same thing. The Cohn/McMaster op-ed uses the word “friend”—without ever making clear who belongs to that category—but its logic is that of a nation friendless and alone. Perhaps the most terrifying thing about the Trump presidency is the way even its most worldly figures, in words composed for them by its deepest thinkers, have reimagined the United States in the image of their own chief: selfish, isolated, brutish, domineering, and driven by immediate appetites rather than ideals or even longer-term interests.

Like Trump himself, this general and this financier who speak for him know only the language of command, not of respect. They summon partners to join them “to enhance *American* security, promote *American* prosperity, and extend *American* influence around the world”—and never anticipate or answer the question, “Why should we British, French, Germans, Canadians, Australians, and on and on through the catalogue of your disrespected allies join *that* project?”

Under the slogan of restoring American greatness, they are destroying it. Promising readers that they want to “restore confidence in American leadership,” they instead threaten and bluster in ways that may persuade partners that America has ceased to be the leader they once respected—but an unpredictable and dangerous force in world affairs, itself to be contained and deterred by new coalitions of ex-friends.

* This article originally named Gary Cohn as CEO of Goldman Sachs. We regret the error.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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