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OPINION | REVIEW & OUTLOOK

The Trump First Doctrine

Putin respects strength but Trump showed weakness.

By The Editorial Board

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President Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin give a joint news conference following their meeting at the Presidential Palace in Helsinki, Finland, July 16. PHOTO: © SHARIFULIN VALERY/TASS VIA ZUMA PRESS

Donald Trump left for Europe a week ago with his reputation enhanced by a strong Supreme Court nomination. He returned Monday with that reputation diminished after a tumultuous week of indulging what amounts to the Trump First Doctrine.

Mr. Trump marched through Europe with more swagger than strategy. His diplomacy is personal, rooted in instinct and impulse, and he treats other leaders above all on how much they praise Donald J. Trump. He says what pops into his head to shock but then disavows it if there's a backlash. He criticizes institutions and policies to grab headlines but then claims victory no matter the outcome.

Foreign Edition Podcast

The Trump-Putin Summit; Brexit Regrets



00:00 / 21:37



The world hasn't seen a U.S. President like this in modern times, and as ever in Trump World everyone else will have to adapt. Let's navigate between the critics who predict the end of world order and the cheerleaders who see only genius, and try to offer a realistic assessment of the fallout from a troubling week.

- *NATO*. The result here seems better than many feared. Mr. Trump bullied the allies with rhetoric and insulted Germany by claiming it is "totally controlled" by Russia. But his charges about inadequate military spending and Russia's gas pipeline had the advantage of being true, as most leaders acknowledged.

The 23-page communique that Mr. Trump endorsed is a solid document that improves NATO's capabilities to deter and resist a threat from Russia. Mr. Trump's last-minute demand that countries raise military spending to 4% of GDP was weird, but he is right that more countries are likely to meet the 2% target.

One risk is that Mr. Trump's constant criticism of NATO will undermine public support for it in the U.S.—and, more dangerously, undermine the alliance's deterrence against Russia. If Vladimir Putin concludes Mr. Trump isn't willing to protect the Baltic states, he may pull another Crimea.

- *The Brits*. Mr. Trump turned a friendly visit into a fiasco by criticizing Prime Minister Theresa May's Brexit strategy in an interview with the Sun newspaper. He backtracked a day later, calling his own comments on tape "fake news," and Mrs. May was gracious.

But Mr. Trump should encourage a U.S.-British post-Brexit trade deal both in the U.S. interest and to help Britain negotiate the most favorable Brexit terms from the European Union. Other leaders will conclude from his rude treatment of Mrs. May that working with Mr. Trump is more perilous than fighting him.

- *The EU.* In contrast to NATO, Mr. Trump does seem to want to undermine the European compact. He called it a “foe” on trade, which will make negotiating a better trade deal even less likely. He seems determined to impose a 20% or higher tariff on European autos to strike at Germany, which would also hit France and others.

The U.S. isn’t part of the EU, but American Presidents have found it useful as an ally to leverage sanctions against, say, Russia or Iran. Mr. Trump is stoking European resentments that will bite back sooner or later when he wants Europe’s help.

- *Russia.* Details from the private Trump-Putin talks in Helsinki will spill out in coming days, but Monday’s joint press conference was a personal and national embarrassment. On stage with the dictator whose election meddling has done so much harm to his Presidency, Mr. Trump couldn’t even bring himself to say he believed his own intelligence advisers like Dan Coats over the Russian strongman.

“I have—I have confidence in both parties,” Mr. Trump said. “So I have great confidence in my intelligence people, but I will tell you that President Putin was extremely strong and powerful in his denial today.” Denials from liars usually are strong and powerful.

The charitable explanation for this kowtow to the Kremlin is that Mr. Trump can’t get past his fury that critics claim his election was tainted by Russian interference. And so he couldn’t resist, in front of the world, going off on a solipsistic ramble about “Hillary Clinton’s emails” and Democratic “servers.” He can’t seem to figure out that the more he indulges his ego in this fashion, and the more he seems to indulge Mr. Putin, the more ammunition he gives to his opponents.

For a rare moment in his Presidency, Mr. Trump also projected weakness. He was the one on stage beseeching Mr. Putin for a better relationship, while the Russian played it cool and matter of fact. Mr. Trump touted their personal rapport, saying the bilateral “relationship has never been worse than it is now. However, that changed as of about four hours ago. I really believe that.” In four hours?

Mr. Putin focused on his agenda of consolidating Russian strategic gains in Syria, Ukraine and arms control, and suggesting that the American might help. Mr. Trump even seemed to soften his stance against Russia’s Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline to Germany.

By going soft on Mr. Putin, Mr. Trump will paradoxically find it even harder to make deals with the Russian. Republicans and Democrats will unite in Congress, as they should, to limit his diplomatic running room. Mr. Trump may decide to court Mr. Putin anyway, like Barack Obama did Iran’s mullahs, but political isolation concerning a foreign adversary is a weak and dangerous place to be.

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