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THE WORLD'S DEMOCRACIES: THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING ALLIES

— Janice Stein

Democratic allies of the United States are feeling lonely. They are shaking their heads in disbelief at the arbitrary way President Trump abandoned the Kurds and, in a phone call, all but gave President Erdogan of Turkey a green light to cross the border into Syria and pummel America's former ally with artillery fire. The howls of outrage from former senior U.S. military officers, and senators do not decrease the worry about a United States that is turning inward, and seems to care little for its long-standing friends.

It is not only the substance of US policy that has raised anxieties in the democratic alliance to new heights. There is a legitimate debate to be had about the wisdom of stationing forces in the Middle East, and many allies would agree that a considered rethink is appropriate. There is also widespread agreement in the democratic world on tougher policies toward China, although far less support for tariffs as the principal instrument.

What is so alarming is the openly transactional perspective of the leader of the democratic alliance. This President prefers autocrats to bothersome democrats. After all, autocrats have far more political space to make deals than do democrats, and they are far less constrained by the rules.

Relationships are far more important to allies than deals. Allies count on relationships that are built over time, and create trust. These relationships are shock absorbers that insulate alliances even when there is serious policy disagreement. Germany and Canada disagreed with President Bush's decision to use military force in Iraq in 2003, but no one questioned the value of the alliance, and everyone was careful to protect the relationships.

Alliances are not consistent with transactional politics where the deal is more important than the partner. What are lonely friends to do?

Some allies believe that this presidency will pass, in a year or in five, and then all will return to normal. The strategy is therefore to shore up the liberal international order that was especially important to the smaller democracies. Play for time. Hang on by your fingernails. Stay beneath the radar.

That strategy ignores the disruptive forces that are undermining the liberal international order that go far beyond this president. Indeed, President Trump is the consequence, not the cause of these forces. The inequality created by the last wave of hyper-globalization, the decline of international trade as a proportion of the global economy, the thickening of state borders and digital boundaries, the rise of authoritarian capitalism, and illiberal democracies in the wake of a wave of populism that has swept the democratic world, and the early stages of the fourth industrial revolution all combine to amplify the forces of disruption.

It is the convergence of disruptive forces that sounds the alarm.

The heyday of the liberal international order is over. As good as it was, and as much as we in the democratic world grieve its passing, its best days are behind us. The liberal order is now challenged by Russia, by China, by strong regional leaders in Brazil and Turkey, by domestic political forces within Europe, and, of course, by the president of the United States and those voters who support him.

What indeed are small democratic allies to do?

Canada exemplifies the painful policy dilemmas of a lonely ally. It will have little choice in the world that is coming but to be far more strategic in the partnerships that it makes. And these partnerships will be far more issues-driven than they have been in the past.

Canada will always pay extraordinary attention to what the United States wants. We, along with Mexico, share a continent with the United States and depend on it for our prosperity and our security. More and more, however, Canada will look at the terms of “the deal” issue by issue, with much less confidence that goodwill built on one issue will spill over to another.

Canada will also look for other partners, on a case-by-case basis. We would be foolish to ignore China, where rapid growth will continue for at least another two decades, but we will likely approach negotiations with a skeptical eye, and a strong focus on the term sheet. Canada will have much the same approach to Russia, and many others.

This focus on strategic partnering—alone or in shifting groups of states—international institutions, and civil society actors that are like-minded on specific issues, will become the proxy for the more deeply embedded alliances that made the world so predictable for the last seventy years.

The irony is obvious. A strategy of selective partnering, with close attention to the specifics of the deal, is a transactional approach. It is a poor substitute for alliances that built deep relationships over time. But in a world where the leader of the democratic alliance is wholly transactional, and where the broader trends make the happier days of past alliances much less likely to reassert themselves, lonely allies have little choice.

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