



IT'S THE LEADERSHIP, STUPID!

TANGUY STRUYE

*Professor of International Relations
 Université catholique de Louvain*

If we believe President Trump, his travel abroad to the Middle East and Europe was a “home run”. Although it was certainly not a disaster, it was definitely not a success and the main reason is that President Trump does not understand the complexity of the world, power or leadership. Trump is a president in the 21st century, limited to tools of the 19th and 20th century, minus the skills of diplomacy.

We could have expected from a President, who is a businessman to have knowledge on leadership or management. It is clearly not the case, although it is no surprise when considering that he does not like to read and believes he knows everything. As Hall Brands mentioned in different articles in the last few weeks, the president does not have a grand strategy, meaning that he does not know what he is doing and where he is taking the country. Consequently his foreign policy has been characterized by a “flip-flop foreign policy” (on Syria, China, Russia, NATO...). When assessing the first months of the Trump presidency, this foreign policy seems to be the crux of the problem: the Trump administration, due to regular indecision and to its incapacity to fulfill its role as leader, gave the opportunity to potential challengers to take the initiative and even set the agen-

da from time to time. This problem is exacerbated by the fact that the president clearly blames everyone but himself, does not listen and does not want to learn. To be unpredictable is not necessarily a bad option (madman theory) but it still means the leader needs to master the tools of international relations. Something Trump clearly does not.

Obsessed with numbers and quantification, Trump sees power only as determined by material capacities (GDP, population, military budget...) and selective means (coercion, use of force, sanctions...). This definition of power is restrictive and outdated. Power is more complex and subtle than just economics and military. Yes, the United States needs a strong modern economy based on innovation, foreign direct investments, market capitalization, research and development, patent deposits, new technologies (3D, cloud computing, nanotechnology or biotechnology), economic resilience, university education but certainly not on...coal. The United States also needs to be militarily credible on the global scene. The reputation for war-aversion under the Obama administration hurt the American status, prestige and reliability. This trait at times created a leadership vacuum, weakening Washington's allies and strength-

ening potential adversaries. But going beyond quantifiable capacities means taking into consideration social and structural dimensions of power, hence accounting for social norms, relations, legitimacy, or empowerment.

In managerial terms, Trump focuses exclusively on transactional leadership, defined as relying on the duo rewards-punishments, closer to the coercive dimension of power. In this type of leadership, goals are set by the leader without necessarily including the followers/allies. It implies an effective control over means of threat or reward by the dominant power. Of course transactional leadership is necessary but not sufficient- certainly today when the United States is in relative decline. Power distance, developed by Hofstede, illustrates this phenomenon: the greater the asymmetry of power between leader and followers, the more the leader will be able to impose itself via its capacities, hence the more transactional its leadership. On the contrary, if the gap keeps shrinking – and provided that the leader wishes to stay at the top of the pyramid – the dominant power must increasingly consider its followers' needs and interests and ought to share parts of the leadership's responsibilities with them. This transformational leadership ought to

be applied by Washington towards allies by empowering them with parts of the responsibility of the world order's stability, while enabling them in this task. The art of leadership is thus to adapt to the context of a given situation (there is no "size fits all").

The United States needs to avoid becoming what John Gaddis labeled a "system destroyer" instead of a "system builder". The set up of an international order requires a legitimation of American power by other states. More specifically, the latter have to recognize the authority of the former. In that sense, power in its relational aspect refers to a country's status; it reflects the need for a country to be recognized and respected within the international hierarchy of states. A state has a status bestowed upon it because others belonging to the same social system recognize that state in that status.

Under President Obama, the United States became aware of the "Lippmann Gap" that characterizes situations in which engagements of a nation's foreign policy exceeds its power: this resulted in an exhaustion of resources and power energy, tolling the bell of its domination. The Trump administration thus rightly denounces buck-passing and free-riding, insisting on sharing risks, burden, costs and blood; and it is important that allies understand this message, but that will only be possible if the US does not lecture its allies and shows measure, humility and openness towards them. It has to be a win-win situation, and not a zero-sum game. Washington cannot afford to lose allies. Thus the strategic narrative is very important. As explained by Lieber, "skillful integration of power and diplomacy, wielded with prudence and informed judgment strengthens deterrence, provides reassurance to allies, and can actually lessen the need for military action".

We may quote here Lao Tzu : "The wise leader settles for good work and does not take all the credit for what happens. When the work is done, let them say with pride, we have done this together". As Chaleff explains in management, it is a triad "consisting

of leaders and followers joined in a common purpose". Consequently, the United States has to make its followers feel part of the strategic process. Avolio and Reichard are right when they point out that "leadership is not defined by the exercise of power but by the capacity to increase the sense of power among those led. The most essential work of the leader is to create more leaders".

If an American president is only able to lecture its allies and not explain the long term objectives, to define a grand strategy so that the allies feel part of the project, the United States will lose its credibility and status, encouraging allies to become "toxic followers" resisting or defying the leader. Because of its relative decline Washington, now more than ever, needs to rely on its allies. In a certain way, the United States should reactivate the seventies' Guam/Nixon Doctrine by designating pivot states. This means closely supervising the phases these states will undergo during the implementation of their new role: empowerment, enablement and accountability. Furthermore, strategic clarity (defining objectives, outcomes...) accompanied by strategic narrative is a requirement in order to foster partners and allies' accountability. That being said, if Washington does not accept to be held accountable, making others accountable will be a difficult task. Leadership and accountability are two sides of the same coin. Leaders who absolve themselves of any responsibility cannot effectively lead others; in other words, with leadership comes responsibility.

As President Theodore Roosevelt remarked, "Nine-tenths of wisdom is being wise in time". Only a grand strategy characterized by maintaining a world order structured around the United States through transformational leadership, which gives more autonomy and responsibilities to middle and some emerging powers, can be successful.

This newfound form of leadership, although less dominant would be more pragmatic and acceptable to others. Hence, it would safeguard the pres-

ent liberal order (Pax Americana) while satisfying the status of allies through participated, delegated and situational leadership. As Pollman argues "statesmanship is arguably the highest exercise of a leader's political skills in the service of the state, and it is what distinguishes an average national leader from one that has a distinctive historical legacy". All this means, of course, to have a President Trump who would listen more to his Cabinet members and National Security Adviser than to his inner circle of loyalists. Thankfully, as D. Rumsfeld pointed out Trump has an A-Team on foreign policy (McMaster, Mattis, Halley, Powell, Tillerson). Yet will it be enough to turn the tide?

Tanguy Stuyve de Swielande is Professor of International Relations at the Université catholique de Louvain (Belgium).

