

Real and Fake Threats to U.S. Vital Interests

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There has been considerable chatter inside the Washington Beltway about the meaning of President Donald Trump's recent forays into international trade at the G-7 meeting in Canada and his nuclear disarmament tete-a-tete with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un in Singapore. Depending on where one sits on the ideological spectrum G-7 is being viewed either as a calculated and largely ignorant insult to America's closest allies or as a long overdue accounting for trade and defense imbalances that have severely damaged the U.S. economy. The [most vitriolic analysis](#) came from Republicans like Senator John McCain who accused Trump of betraying America's allies while also aiding its enemies. McCain was referring in part to the president's eminently reasonable suggestions that Moscow be allowed to rejoin the G-7 and that it would be beneficial to get together personally with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

The meeting with Jong-un likewise is being described as a giveaway to North Korea with nothing in exchange but White House spin or as a brilliant maneuver to break a diplomatic logjam that has prevailed for more than twenty years. Those who are particularly concerned over the issue of a possible nuclear exchange taking place are pleased that the two sides are talking, even if, as *The Hill* [observes](#), it will now be up to Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to "put meat on the bones" by initiating a series of confidence building steps that will lead to a program for finally ending the Korean War and denuclearizing the region.

[In his analysis](#) of what to expect from Singapore, former Foreign Service Officer Peter Van Buren quotes another FSO Asia hand William Johnson, who describes how diplomacy is a process which

"...is often a series of failures, and in the best case, the failures become incrementally less bad, until the least spectacular failure is declared to be success. Diplomacy is a game where the goalposts are supposed to move, and often, to move erratically. Trump needs a plan, with specific goals, each laid out neatly in a set of talking points, not because he will attain those goals, but because he needs to figure out how short of them he can afford to fall or how far beyond them he can push his interlocutor."

One would hope that in both the case of G-7 and Singapore wiser heads in the Administration will prevail and convince the White House to remain on target about protecting genuine American interests using diplomacy and whatever other tools are at hand.

Above all, a careful assessment of what the actual threats against the United States might be ten or twenty years down the road should be considered to frame appropriate responses. Was the presidential onslaught at G-7 justified in terms of protecting the national interest

relating to unfair trade practices? Is a transnational defense strategy beneficial to the United States if it is required to bear most of the burden financially? And finally, what are the real military and political threats that confront the Washington?

The trade issue is perhaps the most complicated to deal with as most countries run surpluses with some trading partners and deficits with others, something called competitive advantage. The Donald Trump claim that that Canada runs a \$100 billion surplus with the U.S. [is incorrect](#). In reality, the U.S. has a small surplus in trading with Canada, last year amounting to \$2.8 billion. So, is Canada a major source of trade imbalance? The answer would have to be “no,” even though it is demonstrably protectionist regarding food products. But there are other regions that have a large trade advantage vis-à-vis the U.S. The European Union runs a \$100 billion surplus and China \$375.

Europe aside, does China’s trade advantage have security implications? Yes, it does as China is the world’s most populous nation with the world’s largest economy. Economic power eventually translates into military power and if Beijing is closing its market to American products arbitrarily while selling its own goods in a relative open U.S. marketplace it becomes a vital national interest to correct that. And there are [clear indications](#) that Beijing deliberately distorts the marketplace by maintaining an undervalued Yuan and creating hurdles that foreign companies must negotiate to do business in China. China also owns 19% of Washington’s Treasury note issued debt, totaling \$1.18 trillion, which it could unload at any time causing an economic crash in the U.S. The Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats [has described](#) the U.S. national debt as the most-grave long-term security challenge facing the country.

Defense policy and military threats from competitors constitute together a single issue as one drives the other. It is ironic that the United States, which is relatively unthreatened by enemies, continues to believe that it must intervene overseas to be safe. The current conflicts with Iran as well as in Syria and in Afghanistan are not vital interests for the United States, instead being driven largely by feckless allies, defense contractors and a sensationalist media. Even North Korea, which is a serious issue, is hardly a major threat to Americans.

The alleged threat from Russia, demonized by both the political left and right, is largely a fiction created to sell newspapers and give aspiring politicians something to talk about. Even if Russia wanted to re-occupy Eastern Europe it does not have the resources to do so. Its army is relatively small and designed for defense, its economy is the same size as Spain’s. It is nuclear armed to be sure, but, unless one is suicidal, nuclear weapons are ultimately defensive rather than offensive, to serve as a deterrent guaranteeing national survival when attacked but hardly usable otherwise.

So realistically Trump should be looking at the over the horizon economic and political problems deriving from Chinese power if he wants to address a real vital national interest. And he should do what he can to keep talking to G-7 about trade imbalances while also doing whatever is possible to hasten the demise of NATO, which has outlived its usefulness both from a fiscal and security point of view. And by all means, he should keep talking to Kim Jong-un and arrange sooner rather than later to meet with Vladimir Putin.

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