



All Show or All Strategy?

By Thomas Kleine-Brockhoff

BERLIN — As the American Rumpelstiltskin has left Brussels, it is time to sort through the rubble that Donald Trump's descent upon NATO's headquarters has left behind. However, it is still a mystery what he achieved and what it means that he put the Alliance through a near-death experience.

A military alliance consists of hardware and software. Hardware, that's tanks, planes, and ships. Software, that's the trust among the allies that they will come to each other's defense, thus deterring adversaries. Clearly, Trump came to Brussels ready to damage the software in order to get the United States' allies to spend more on the hardware.

But did he or will he get this? Certainly, he scared the bejesus out of the allies. He clearly enjoyed their moment of puzzlement that put him in a god-like position: he seemed to be in control of the destiny of others. But then, minutes later in a Trumpian turn of events he destroyed his own creation and ended the moment of absolute power with his bizarreness, his exaggerations, his lack of seriousness, his unscripted and off-hand remarks. Twenty-eight heads of government were already willing to spend 2 percent of GDP on their

militaries, though they struggle to get there. They were also willing to swallow Trump's lectures. But when he upped the ante and not only called for the 2 percent target to be met by the end of this year rather than 2024, but also topped this fantasy by unilaterally declaring a long-term spending goal of 4 percent of GDP, Trump succeeded only in uniting everyone else in opposition to himself, thus undermining his goal of getting more spending commitments. In the end, it is not clear whether he received any new commitments from them at all.

In fact, the hyperbole of the president's statements during the final press conference contributed to the confusion: Out of the blue, he declared himself to be the victor of Brussels, the man who had singlehandedly transformed NATO in the span of 48 hours. With the stroke of a threat the world was more secure.

The result of the summit is sobering. While it is not clear that Trump got more hardware, it is clear that he did damage the software of NATO. He left the allies in fear and loathing, and encouraged potential adversaries to think that NATO is a paper tiger with a waning U.S. commitment.



So, how to make sense of it all? There are two theories out there:

The first theory — let's call it the psycho-drama theory — declares the theatrics of Brussels to be a typical Trump stunt. The narcissist steps onto the stage and makes a summit meeting all about himself. With his penchant for flattery he holds court. He demands and enjoys followership. He tells others what to do and when to do it. He attacks them. He assembles and distorts the facts to fit his purpose. And his purpose is to fulfill the desires of his own ego and, in the end, to be able to declare victory.

According to this school of thought only short-term considerations drive Trump's behavior. There is no rhyme or reason behind it, much less a strategy. And if there is a goal behind these actions then it is as part of his permanent electoral campaign. His base needs to be shown that there are villains out there who are after the United States' money while exploiting its deep-seated goodness.

Because adherents of this theory believe that Trump's behavior is about character, not strategy, they suggest to just live with it and largely ignore the president for all practical policy purposes. Just carry on, their mantra is.

The adherents of the second theory — let's call it the go-it-alone-theory — do not dispute that character traits and electoral tactics play a role, but they note that Trump has more of a strategy than he is often given credit for. They do not want to discount his remark at the summit as an empty threat that the United States could “do its own thing” if he does not get his way.

Donald Trump has long been convinced that the U.S. alliance system no longer serves its national interest. In an interview with Playboy Magazine 28 years ago, he claimed that the United States was “defending wealthy nations for nothing,” nations that “laugh at our stupidity.” His views have not changed and he now wants to dismantle the system because he does not see it as a force multiplier for his country, but as a drain on national resources. Trump is out there to destroy the institutions and commitments that

make up the liberal international order which has emerged since World War II. In his view, the United States should not have allies, but fans, followers, and sycophants who do what it wants as long as it wants it. Such client states should support the United States in its struggles with other great powers.

According to this theory, this week's drama saw Trump's first attempt to turn allies into client states by threatening and humiliating them. He did not succeed — yet. And he may not succeed as long as the U.S. foreign policy establishment, including the Senate, continues to forcefully oppose him.

According to this theory, NATO's Brussels Summit will not have had the happy ending Trump claimed and the other leaders pretended to believe out of relief it was not worse after all. It will have been part of the gradual emergence of the United States as a go-it-alone superpower.

Likely, it will not take too long to find out which assumptions are correct.

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