

Wrecking Ball-In-Chief: Trump's Withdrawals from International Commitments

Written by Holger Janusch

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HOLGER JANUSCH, JUL 17 2019

During his presidency, President Trump has canceled several important international arrangements and commitments. Directly after his inauguration, he withdrew from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) that was already signed and was ready for ratification by Congress. In June 2017, he declared the withdrawal from the Paris Agreement on Climate Change. In May 2018, the Trump Administration withdrew from the Iran Nuclear Deal – the so-called Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) – and reimposed economic sanctions against Iran. Furthermore, President Trump threatened to withdraw *inter alia* from the North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). This unreliability seems to confirm the concerns of classical scholars of democracy theory such as Alexis de Tocqueville that democracies are unreliable partners in international affairs because of the more frequent leadership turnover. However, research on reliability proves the opposite. Democracies cooperate more often, are more reliable partners and comply more often with international commitments than autocracies (e.g. Leeds, Mattes, & Vogel, 2009; Leeds & Savun, 2007). Studies name three major reasons for these empirical observations.

First, scholars argue that democratic governments need a majority of a large electorate, compared to autocratic leaders, who depend on a much smaller winning coalition to stay in office (Bueno de Mesquita, Morrow, Siverson, & Smith, 2003). Therefore, democratic governments tend to provide rather public goods than private goods which is why fewer dramatic policy changes can be expected after leadership turnovers. However, the increasing polarization in the US electorate and strict partisan divide on policy issues (Campbell, 2016), including foreign policies, makes us expect more dramatic policy shifts as a result of a new presidency. The problem is intensified by the fact that Republicans and Democrats do not only differ on the right policies and policy priorities (Jones, 2019) but also on basic facts (LaLoggia, 2018).

Second, institutional constraints such as separation of powers prevent policy shifts (Choi, 2003; Gaubatz, 1996). This argument is based on the assumption that international treaties have been ratified by the domestic legislature. Hence, legal procedures are needed to withdraw from international arrangements. Yet, the two-thirds majority rule of the Senate has always made it difficult for the United States to ratify international treaties. The polarization in the US party system increases this problem. There is a growing trend that international treaties are implemented just by executive agreements, orders or political commitments. The Kyoto protocol and the Iran deal are two examples for the latter. With growing polarization in Congress, we can expect that the United States will in the future implement international arrangements more often as decrees which can be easily challenged by the succeeding administration.

Third, the public values maintenance and compliance with international commitments and punishes its own leadership for defection (Gaubatz, 1996). At first glance, public polls confirm this hypothesis. A majority of the US public for example opposed for example the withdrawal from the Paris agreement (59%; compared to 28% approval rate) (Clement & Dennis, 2017) and Iran deal (63%; compared to 29% approval rate) (Sparks, 2018). Yet, this does not mean that the electorate is willing to punish its leadership; a majority of Republican voters supports the withdrawal from the international commitments. But even Republicans who do not support the withdrawal will not necessarily punish President Trump in the next election. In the context of growing tribalism, we can expect that voters are less likely to punish presidents from their own party even if they do not favor the taken foreign policy decisions.

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In short, the growing polarization and tribalism in the US electorate and party system increase the risk that the US becomes more and more an unreliable partner by undermining constraints that prevent democracies from violating or withdrawing from existing commitments. However, a fourth argument that states comply with international commitments even when they are non-binding and no sanctions exist for violation is reputation. This argument works independently of the political system. A state that violates existing commitments suffers a reputational loss. As a result, other states are less likely to cooperate with that state in the future (Crescenzi, Kathman, Kleinberg, & Wood, 2012). Thus, an unreliable state loses future gains of potential agreements. Because of this reputational damage, successors are more likely to comply with international commitments even if they do not see them as good policy.

Nevertheless, President Trump withdrew from several agreements despite this potential reputational loss. While his decisions are inter alia driven by his policy ideas – for example, President Trump saw TPP, the Paris Agreement, and JCPOA as deeply flawed –, his understanding about negotiations gives an additional explanation for his foreign policy decision making. Firstly, President Trump does not feel obliged to any agreement he has not negotiated personally. It is obvious that he does not take into account a state's reputation for reliability. However, this does not mean that he does not comply with deals he or his administration has negotiated. He seems rather to be loyal to words he made. Furthermore, this point should also not be misunderstood that President Trump has a realist understanding of international politics. It is rather the opposite. He always emphasizes international cooperation and finding a deal, although making a deal is a competitive and coercive process from his perspective.

Secondly, President Trump has a simple, one-sided understanding of power. It is all about hard power, never about soft power. And even regarding the exercise of hard power, President Trump focuses just on punishments, sanctions, and threats. Rewards and promises are a rare instrument of his bargaining toolbox. The main principle in his book *The Art of the Deal* supports this interpretation: 'Use your leverage' (Trump & Schwartz, 1987, p. 37). In this context, he describes in more detail: 'The worst thing you can possibly do in a deal is seem desperate to make it' (Trump & Schwartz, 1987, p. 37). Following this credo, reliability is a weakness and worsens the leverage. While President Trump's decisions are often seen as unpredictable, his simple credo, however, reveals a basic pattern that can explain his frequent threats to end ongoing negotiations and existing cooperation. The threats shall demonstrate that he is not depending on cooperation and is willing to use all the leverage he has at his disposal. It is all about the reputation of being a tough negotiator (for theoretical background see Janusch, 2018). While this simple view of negotiations can enhance the leverage of the Trump Administration to some extent, it comes with great risks by escalating conflicts. Furthermore, it damages the reliability, soft power and thereby leadership of the United States in world politics.

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About the author:

Holger Janusch is an associate professor for International Relations at the Andrásy University, Budapest. He holds a doctorate degree in International Relations from the University of Wuppertal, Germany. He published various books and articles on international negotiations and bargaining power such as "The Interaction Effects of Bargaining Power", "The Breakdown of International Negotiations", and 'Normative Power and the Logic of Arguing.'