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Democracy Dies in Darkness



America's allies despise Trump — and that's a threat to NATO

By **Brian Klaas**

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By now we've all heard or read about the hot-mic incident at the NATO summit in the United Kingdom this week. A camera caught several national leaders joking about the antics of President Trump. Many commentators drew unflattering comparisons with Trump's oft-cited claim that other countries "are laughing at us" and left it at that.

Yet this might miss the full significance of the story. The leaders of our NATO allies aren't alone in seeing Trump as a dangerous joke — their citizens do, too. And Trump's deepening unpopularity in the other countries of the West is becoming as much of a threat to NATO as Trump himself.

It's worth noting that Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau didn't disavow his own comments in the recorded incident — doing so would have made him look like an appeaser to his own deeply Trump-skeptical public. At the NATO summit, Trudeau also attended a news conference with the U.S. president — far less widely noted by the media — at which Trump referred to House Intelligence Committee Chairman Adam B. Schiff (D-Calif.) as a "deranged human being" and a "maniac." No other world leader behaves like that at an international forum.

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Such outbursts, which have a devastating effect on the United States' reputation overseas, make it far harder for our allies to be seen as close to Trump. And because their citizens see Trump as the current representation of the United States, it's becoming increasingly difficult for the leaders of Germany, or Britain, or Canada, or France to sell pro-American positions to their own voters. Just witness Boris Johnson's carefully choreographed dance to avoid Trump's company during the NATO summit, knowing that any all-too-obvious association with the U.S. president could doom the prime minister's chances in the approaching British election. For the leaders of our allies, proximity to Trump is electoral poison.

There are foreign policy consequences to Trump's toxicity. Since he took office, global support for U.S. leadership has plummeted. According to Pew Research in a late 2018 study, there has been a collapse in global confidence that the U.S. president will "do the right thing in world affairs." From President Barack Obama to Trump, such confidence has fallen 76 percentage points in Germany, 75 percentage points in France, 58 percentage points in Canada, 52 percentage points in Australia, 51 percentage points in the United Kingdom and 48 percentage points in Japan. In Russia, by contrast, confidence in the U.S. president has *increased* by 8 percentage points.

If Trump's presidency survives impeachment and the 2020 election, America's friends will no longer see the United States as a reliable ally. No longer will they be able to cling to the comforting notion that the Trump era was a mistaken blip. Instead, they will feel forced to hedge their bets with other global powers, downgrading their relationships with the United States while aspiring to cozier relations with China and Russia. Much about November 2020 is uncertain, but this much is clear: It will be a tipping-point election that recalibrates American power and the world's views of the United States for a generation. Testing the waters with a Trump presidency has already alarmed our allies. If U.S. voters decide to reelect him, the breach will be irreparable.

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I have been in plenty of rooms in Westminster and Brussels in which diplomats and politicians speak candidly about Trump off the record. The view is almost universal: that he is a mercurial buffoon who threatens not just the values but also the interests of NATO member states and international security in general.

But it is also almost universally agreed that nobody from their governments should speak plainly about their view of Trump on the record, lest they poke through his thin skin and make things even worse. This is precisely why Trump is correct that Justin Trudeau of Canada is “two-faced.” He has to be. Every other leader of our key allies is the same; Trudeau just had the misfortune of being caught on camera.

The United Kingdom, for example, has long cherished its “special relationship” with the United States. In Mayfair, just north of Buckingham Palace, there is a statue on a bench of a smiling Franklin Delano Roosevelt laughing with Winston Churchill. The updated statue would depict Boris Johnson laughing *at* Donald Trump.

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How long, then, can America's core alliances survive if British, or Canadian, or German politicians get punished politically for promoting that alliance with this president? According to a [2018 survey](#) in Germany, for example, only 14 percent of Germans see the United States as a reliable partner. Eighty-two percent see Trump's America as an unreliable ally.

Americans are blind to this alarming shift. In a 2019 survey, 75 percent of Americans said the U.S. relationship with Germany was “good” or “very good.” By contrast, 64 percent of Germans said the U.S. relationship with Germany was “bad” or “very bad.” At the same time, Germans are considering alternatives. Forty-three percent of Germans believe China could become a reliable partner.

The United States is stronger with allies. Reelecting Trump brings a serious risk that we will lose them.

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