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Trump's First Foreign Trip and the Fate of the Paris Agreement: Reading the Tea Leaves from the G7 and NATO Summits

By David A. Wirth Tuesday, May 23, 2017, 10:30 AM

President Trump's campaign promise to "cancel" the Paris Agreement, and his subsequent statement that he has an "open mind" on the question, will now be transported to the multilateral stage in a setting of high politics. After several delays, the White House reports that it will make a decision about withdrawing from the Paris Agreement on climate change only after the upcoming G7 summit, which ends next Saturday, May 27. Before that on Trump's agenda comes another multilateral meeting, this one with 27 other NATO countries.

In principle, such multilateral summit meetings allow heads of state to interact informally and to engage in face-to-face communication that might otherwise be difficult to arrange. In reality—at least in the past—they have tended to be highly scripted, with extensive pre-negotiations among participating governments leading to final consensus communiqués that assure that no government is caught off guard, or any head of state embarrassed.

The G7 summit is the latest in a series of interactions over time among repeat players representing about half of global GDP in a loosely-textured, peripatetic setting. The Russian Federation was invited to attend in 1997 and the group became known as the G8, until Russia was suspended in 2014 after its annexation of Crimea. Participating countries rotate in hosting the meetings and chairing them, with a different location and presidency every year. Created by the 1949 North Atlantic Treaty, NATO is more highly structured as a standing, multilateral military alliance (including subsidiary bodies), with a permanent headquarters in Brussels to which alliance members accredit the equivalent of ambassadors.

In any event, such gatherings typically do not have the highly focused purpose of negotiations leading to a binding treaty. Their outputs are generally not considered legally binding, although they do have considerable political significance. A variety of apparently unrelated issues may be addressed, depending on the circumstances and, in the case of the G7, the preferences of the rotating presidency. Consequently, governments frequently find the resulting final statements to be a useful vehicle for signaling future joint policy directions, for announcing new cooperative initiatives, or for encouraging other coordinated actions. Such statements also memorialize the tone of the meeting in a measurable way, against a fixed text instead of potentially competing subjective descriptions by various self-interested actors.

Last year's G7 communiqué mentioned the Paris Agreement by name no fewer than nine times, encouraging its early ratification by G7 states, in a passage on climate and energy covering ten paragraphs. That level of coordinated political momentum led to simultaneous acceptance of the agreement by the United States and China in September, and the agreement's entry into force for the United States and other countries in early November 2016. (The debate over the constitutionality of the U.S. acceptance of the Paris Agreement is a strictly domestic legal question, likely of little or no concern to our treaty partners.)

The final G7 statements from 2015, 2014, 2013, and earlier indicate a similar sense of urgency with respect to protection of the global climate. The G7 states, after all, constitute the overwhelming bulk of historical emissions of the gases responsible for climate change, contributing to concerns about current disruptions in climate such as loss of the Antarctic ice. The NATO summit declarations from 2012 and 2014 identify climate change as a security threat, although in less detail than typically found in recent G7 statements.

The other countries participating in both these settings are our allies—in the case of NATO an express military alliance, and in the case of the G7 the world's leading economies, which also happen to be like-minded democracies. So Trump is likely to find a more receptive international audience here than, say, before the UN General Assembly whose members number 193 and which represents a much wider array of states, commensurate with the number of signatories to the Paris Agreement, than either the G7 or NATO.

At the same time, both groupings are to a greater or lesser extent coextensive with the European Union (which participates as such in the G7), a group of countries which has been the most aggressive proponent of early action to reduce emissions of climate-disrupting gases. So both these meetings provide a useful sounding board for testing the viability Trump's campaign promise to "cancel" the Paris Agreement—reportedly the source of much dissension within the White House—among an international audience of friendly states.

The fate of the Paris Agreement has become high politics, with numerous countries encouraging Trump to remain. As such, it is somewhat unavoidably tossed into a larger mixing bowl of issues, including such apparently unrelated issues as trade and NATO funding. While a bit of experience in multilateral diplomacy helps to predict and interpret the outcomes, common sense, logic, and basic human nature also have predictive capacity. So here is how the discussions are likely to play out.

On Paris, Trump may be looking for one of two things from the G7 and NATO summits: (a) diplomatic cover, in the form of multilateral acquiescence in his proposed withdrawal from the Paris Agreement; or (b) reinforcement of the diplomatic need for the United States to remain a party to the agreement, so as to avoid domestic repercussions if he chooses to refrain from withdrawing.

Presumably there is some reason to believe that the United States, on behalf of the President, has pursued a negotiating position designed to justify a withdrawal. Otherwise, we would not be seeing press reports of continued disagreement in the preliminary negotiations. (The president of one country, even the United States, does not have the power to “cancel” or nullify the entirety of a multilateral agreement such as the Paris Agreement, only the power to withdraw from or denounce it on behalf of that state.)

From there, one can make some informed inferences. Unless these final communiqués or statements depart radically from previous practice—always possible with this President—they will be consensus documents. That means that all participating countries will join in the entirety of the document, including its treatment of non-climate issues. That, in turn, implies the need for compromise.

So what is compromise likely to look like under the circumstances?

One possibility is to leave climate out entirely. That might be a plausible outcome for the NATO summit, where climate has played a marginal role as a security consideration in previous summit declarations. Climate was not mentioned at all in the most recent 2016 Warsaw Declaration, likely in part because of the urgency of the Crimea situation. This is the most neutral possibility, in that it allows the reader—the global public, other NATO governments, non-NATO states, industry, the environmental community—to project almost any meaning onto the absence of text addressing the issue.

Omission of the climate issue from the G7 communiqué would be much more difficult, due to its central role in previous meetings, issues of competitiveness related to the use of fossil fuels versus renewable energy sources, the EU’s prior leadership on this issue, and Trump’s own positioning of the issue beforehand.

Among other participating states, Trump might find some particular receptivity from Canada, which withdrew from the prior Kyoto Protocol and declined to accept new reductions in a successor instrument, the Doha Amendment. Japan, a close ally, is likely to be receptive to U.S. requests, particularly in light of the current security situation on the Korean Peninsula. As a result of Brexit, the United Kingdom is obviously relatively more inclined to look to its alliance with the United States than to the Continent in a search for common political will.

On the other hand, Continental Europeans are likely to stiffen their resolve, especially after having been blindsided by demands for NATO restructuring. And remember, it’s not coincidentally called the *Paris* Agreement. Diplomacy is frequently about appearances, and France can hardly be expected to be enthusiastic about Trump’s even appearing to take a whack at its signature accomplishment. The EU is still smarting from the relatively unheralded demise, in part thanks to Trump, of the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership. To add insult to injury, Trump then turned around and suggested negotiating a bilateral trade deal with a post-Brexit United Kingdom, the exact opposite of Obama’s policy designed in part to encourage the continued integrity of the EU.

So then what is compromise language likely to look like?

First, Energy Secretary Rick Perry’s call for renegotiation of the Paris Agreement is likely to be a non-starter, particularly among this group. Such a proposal may appear attractive as a compromise middle ground, but it is entirely unworkable as a practical matter and will be interpreted by other countries as hypocritical. The Paris Agreement covers nearly 200 countries, not just two treaty partners like NAFTA. Even including the entire EU, the countries represented at the G7 summit represent less than 20 percent of the signatories to the Paris Agreement, hardly a group in a position to call for renegotiation with a sense of conviction or substantive legitimacy just on the whim of one player that has just experienced a change in government and appears to be playing primarily to a domestic constituency.

With the possible exception of the United States, all other governments know that the text of the agreement is sufficiently open-ended that that any reasonable mid-course corrections can be accommodated within its framework. Trump will be meeting with countries that have expended immense political capital on the Paris Agreement, and created high expectations among their own publics. Those countries were also relieved to see the United States reengage with the UN-sponsored climate negotiations after the Bush Administration rejected the earlier Kyoto Protocol. They are unlikely to buy into the creation of a snag that could lead to the entire deal’s unraveling. Consequently, a provision in the consensus G7 communiqué calling for renegotiation of the Paris Agreement, while in principle possible, is highly unlikely.

With the possibility of renegotiation out of the way, how is the communiqué then likely to address Paris?

Considering the perspective of both sides of the negotiation provides some insights. A natural approach might be to include alternating statements asserting the pros and cons of the Agreement, giving each side its say, so to speak. The problem with this approach is that, from the point of view of those with the biggest stake in the continued integrity of the Agreement—most likely the French, German, and Italian governments, on behalf of the entire EU—the slightest flyspeck of criticism can be expected to trigger an immediate U.S. withdrawal. The White House might then justify its action by referencing the G7 communiqué as evidence of our allies’ acquiescence to our pulling out.

It is worth noting that Trump himself has created this edge-of-the cliff dynamic, by purposely shifting the action away from the White House and to the G7 summit. The other negotiators know this, and consequently will be extremely wary of language that, while not expressly critical of the Paris Agreement, even acknowledges the states parties' variety of views on the subject.

And don't forget that the contents of the communiqué in principle are all one big bundle and consequently interrelated, even if negotiated in piecemeal fashion. "Nothing is agreed until everything is agreed" is a truism in diplomacy.

A quick review of last year's G7 communiqué discloses statements expressing common positions on trade, migration and refugees, and cybersecurity. This complicates things for the United States across policy arenas. Trump has unilaterally and personally frustrated expectations on the Transpacific and (less obviously) the Transatlantic Partnerships, creating ill will with many allies across both our shores. Canada has been bludgeoned into a renegotiation of NAFTA as an alternative to termination of that agreement. The Trump Administration's executive orders on migration and refugees have provoked worldwide outrage. And presumably, in the highly eventful year since the last G7 summit, the United States is—or should—presumably looking for a high level cooperation on the now immensely fraught question of cybersecurity.

Although they understand that the U.S. political system on occasion produces yo-yo effects such as the radical shifts in policy from Obama to Trump, foreign governments—and particularly our closest allies—themselves value continuity and consistency. Most cannot themselves afford the kind of tectonic shifts seen in the last year in the United States. The upcoming G7 summit can consequently be understood as an attempt to restore a sense of predictability, order, and collaborative sense of purpose after a turbulent year.

After the immense international relief at American reengagement with the UN negotiations leading to the Paris Agreement in 2015, there is a considerable residuum of goodwill toward the United States. Somewhat paradoxically, after the current dustup subsides, the Trump Administration will likely find its influence in the context of the future climate negotiations to be enhanced – but only if it remains in the Paris deal.

In short, when reading the final G7 communiqué—the basic outlines of which have likely already been drafted—don't expect enthusiastic support for the Paris Agreement. Such statements would have been removed during the drafting process as a compromise with the United States. Don't expect express approval of a U.S. pullout. The Europeans would reject that, in part out of a concern for triggering a domino effect from countries like Russia, which is skeptical and has yet to ratify. But also don't expect an express call for the U.S. to remain in the agreement. Except in the unlikely event that the Trump Administration has already made a decision to stay, such language would be an embarrassing loss of face to Trump that a multilateral process is unlikely to produce with respect to one of its own participants.

So don't look for big surprises or momentous statements on either side of the question. But do be prepared to interpret apparently mundane references to the Paris Agreement as it exists, no matter how neutral or anodyne, as small successes, communicating the presupposition intended by their drafters: Those statements will impliedly but importantly communicate the expectation that the status quo will prevail. That necessarily includes the assumption that all the G7 states, including the United States, will remain party to the Agreement going forward, as a flexible vehicle both for asserting their own national interests and for coordinating their efforts for the benefit of the ecosphere and all humankind.

Topics: Climate Change and Security

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