

FINANCIAL TIMES
22-2-17

The parallel worlds of a twin-track US foreign policy

Bemusement, relief and flattery are among allies' reactions to the Trump era

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It felt like an alternative world. A day after I watched Donald Trump turn a press conference into endless bragging about his election victory and rage against the "fake news" media, I was in Munich listening to an altogether different Trump administration message at the annual security conference. First came James Mattis, the defence secretary, and then Mike Pence, the vice-president, and between them they offered a combination of translation, reinterpretation and contradiction of the president's pronouncements.

Nato, it turns out, is not "obsolete" as Mr Trump had suggested, and America is not working to break up the EU. Instead, US officials told the European military and foreign policy establishment that America's support for the transatlantic alliance remained "unwavering". You could hear whispers of satisfaction, see heads nodding and fingers tweeting in approval, as the audience breathed a collective sigh of relief.

Mr Mattis and Mr Pence are the grown-ups Europeans can trust. And yet, the contrast between the president's press conference and the measured behaviour of his lieutenants provided a preview of the parallel realities of Washington that European leaders must find their way through. As one participant joked after Mr Pence's speech: "Trump could tweet tomorrow: 'Mattis, Pence, Fake news'"

Chatting to Americans reinforced the precarious status of the Mattis/Pence message. There is a gulf, they insisted, between the president and many of the officials sent to convey the administration's message around the world.

And so, however relieved Europeans were by the display of US normality and continuity in Munich, they will stay on high alert for Trumpian unpredictability. Germany's government, for example, knows that it must test what administration officials say against Mr Trump's own policies as well as against his character. "It's just something that Europeans have to live with," said a conference delegate.

Europeans are so anxious about Mr Trump's presidency that the mere inclusion of the words "democracy" and "rule of law" in American officials' remarks in Munich was noted as a comforting sign that the administration has not given up on western liberalism.

When referring to Washington politics, however, there's a new language creeping into use, that we used to believe was more suited to autocracies. I am accustomed to intriguing gossip about

the struggle between hardliners and moderates in Iran, for example. I am also used to analysing the deep state in a place like Egypt.

Now officials in Europe are discussing how to bolster moderates in the Trump administration and isolate ideological hardliners led by Steve Bannon, the White House chief strategist. The American deep state, though, is referred to not as the villain that's undermining democracy but as the necessary check on the president's powers.

To the satisfaction of European crowds, by the time the US delegation arrived in Munich, one hardliner on the list of participants - National Security Council head Michael Flynn - had been taken down by the deep state. His replacement, Lieutenant General HR McMaster, fits more into the moderate mould and is seen as another loss for the radicals.

By Sunday morning, the parallel Trumpian world intruded on Munich. Twitter was buzzing with Mr Trump's claim that some terrible terrorist incident had rocked Sweden. It was fake news; Sweden had had a peaceful Friday night.

Amid the head scratching, the Munich audience was treated to a surprise: effusive praise for Mr Trump from the Saudi foreign minister. In a speech, Adel al-Jubeir extolled the American president's pragmatism and his abilities as a problem solver, and declared the new administration's policies fully aligned with those of Saudi Arabia.

After two days of Trump bashing, the Saudi tribute met with some bemusement. But Mr Jubeir may simply be calculating that flattery is the best way to reach the parallel worlds of Washington and reach directly into Mr Trump's mind.