



CIGS Jeffrey Steinberg Seminar

The Trump Presidency after 18 Months

(Summary of Q&A)

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Venue: CIGS Meeting Room, Tokyo, Japan

Daisuke Kotegawa, Research Director, CIGS:

Before moving onto the Q&A session, I would like to start with two questions. First, I would like to ask you to compare the work of the small working group under this firm with the management of the White House by Mr. Obama? Second, recently incumbents from Republicans either lost at the primary election or they announced their retirement. Can you confirm this, and also what is the possible strategy of Mr. Trump in the upcoming midterm election?

Jeffrey Steinberg, Executive Vice President, Pacific Tech Bridge (PTB):

We've had two recent Democratic presidents, who ran the White House like an unruly university department, which is an ineffective, chaotic, and poisonous type of environment. President Obama wanted to control everything, but at the same time didn't want to make decisions. Trump has no problem making decisions, whether they are legitimate, sound, or simply impulsive. We've had instances where bombings in Syria were largely done on based on video footage or photographs of people suffering, which in some instances really didn't depict what Trump was told.

There is a much more streamlined intelligence decision-making process now because there is a certain sense of impatience. During the Obama administration, you had counter-terrorism operations in Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan where local commanders could not strike without getting permission from the White House, where it was hard to get things done. Trump listened to the advice of Mattis, Kelly, and Dunford, and gave field commanders the authority to move quickly. The speed with which ISIS was routed in Iraq and Syria reflects that difference.

One thing that's not well known about Donald Trump is that he formally filed his re-election campaign the day he was inaugurated. Now, when he goes out, you see something more like a campaign rally than a presidential speech, because that is what it is. Donald Trump's core political base is a small but highly energized constituency, who were not all that important to the Obama administration. He is consciously keeping that political base very much energized.

Trump knows that his political base is narrow, and if it falls he is doomed. So, in these past 18 months he has quickly reinvented the Republican Party, and many people are leaving because they feel that the party has been hijacked out from underneath them. There are a lot of groupings inside the Republican Party, and not one of them claims Donald Trump as a member, but he still enjoys 90% support among registered

Republican voters. There have been a number of federal judges, appellate court, district court, and now two new supreme court justices appointed in the last 18 months, which has a long term impact on the federal judicial branch.

Trump has made it very clear, that if you don't like what he is doing then you know where the door is, and a very large number of Republicans have. There are candidates supported by the White House, and in some of these local primary Republican elections candidates endorsed by Trump are winning. A lot of the blue-collar former Democrats who voted for Ronald Reagan in the 1980s are likewise responding positively to Trump.

On the other side, the Democratic Party is a mess, which has not incorporated progressives into the mainstream of the party, and this has caused tremendous problems. There was a primary election in New York City a couple of weeks ago, in which a 28-year-old Hispanic woman, with little money to spend, defeated an incumbent, 20-year member of Congress. She walked the streets of the district, and appealed to a dissatisfied segment of the population, many of whom probably voted for Trump. I think that kind of gives an idea of where we're going, heading into elections.

Kotegawa:

Any questions from the floor?

Questioner1:

Do you see any challenger to Trump from within the Republican Party? And what do you think might cause him to lose the general election against a generic Democratic candidate?

Questioner2:

With General Kelly's potential resignation soon, and the weakening power or influence of the Secretary Mattis, what will be the impact on Trump's foreign policy?

Questioner3:

What might come out of the NATO summit in Brussels and the meeting with President Putin?

Steinberg:

If we were in 2020 election season now, it would be very unlikely that there would be a major challenge to Donald Trump. There are a lot of issues that are not the headline

grabbers, but are very much in the vested interest of the Republican Party. The last time that there was a serious challenge to a sitting incumbent president was in 1980. It was understood that Ronald Reagan was going to clobber Jimmy Carter, so there was an attempt to re-group the Democratic Party, and maybe unseat Carter as the nominee. I could see a Jeff Flake doing a protest, but Donald Trump has been very careful to cultivate Rand Paul. There were a few occasions where Rand Paul was going to vote against the president on different policies, and Trump was able to get him to pull back down. The Republican Party right now is very much the party of Donald Trump.

However, the Mueller investigation is not over, and there could be things not yet known that could be damaging. Another big unknown is the economy. Will Trump's economic domestic agenda really move the economy of the United States in the right direction?

Many things between now and 2020 will change the foundations on which the next presidential election is going to occur, but I would say that it is very unlikely that he would face a serious challenge.

The challenge for the Democratic Party is to figure out what their identity is. They are really deeply divided, and the legacy of 2016 has not been resolved. If you look at the states where Bernie Sanders defeated Hillary Clinton, those went to Donald Trump in the election, because he addressed some of the same issues as Sanders. Hillary Clinton failed to see the dynamic in the country, and there was an assumption that she was guaranteed to win. The Democratic Party still hasn't properly addressed that dynamic, and is deeply split between those who are representing Wall Street, and those who are in a state of insurrection against them. That's an advantage for Trump.

The generals bring a lot of value to the table, including a certain kind of serious discipline and a military establishment that that has been anti-war since the second Bush administration. Mattis has a unique relationship with Trump, and they meet periodically on a fairly regular basis. The content of those discussions is never leaked, and so the relationship remains intact. Mattis responsibility is not so much serving the president as he is serving the nation and the institution of the presidency.

Mattis' other great strength is that he has near-unanimous support within the Pentagon. As a footnote, since John Bolton came in as national security adviser, there have been at least two major leaks about the content of discussions between Mattis and Trump. I

understand it's almost certain that they are coming from Bolton, or somebody in the Bolton camp, pushing back against this military.

There's been a lot of speculation that Mattis is on the outs with Trump, and there is probably a bit of a tilt in the dynamic within the national security team. I expect to see Pompeo and Mattis aligning to further isolate the Bolton faction within the White House. Kelly is in a very, very difficult position. Bolton knows that Kelly tried to do everything possible to cast him aside. My own best evaluation is that Mattis will stay, and that Mattis and Dunford are in complete lockstep, and Trump still listens very much to what they have to say.

I think the hype about Trump showing up for the NATO summit with a sledgehammer is exaggerated. The military establishment is very clear that NATO is an important institution and needs to be preserved. During the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact the attitude was we've won, NATO accomplished its task, and let's dismantle it. The most compelling argument that was made against that was that NATO is the only formal treaty organization that binds the United States in Europe.

One of the critical things that happened at that time was a working agreement whereby East Germany would become a part of NATO, because of the reintegration of Germany. But there would be a clear buffer zone, and no eastward expansion of NATO. And the state that was the most pivotal buffer zone was Ukraine. Putin argues that the West broke the deal, and then participated in Ukraine in ways that led to the overthrow of the Yanukovich Government. The counter from the West is that Russia seized Crimea, and is running operations in Eastern Ukraine. I think we're going to find that the US military and security institutions are not about to walk away from NATO. Trump received a number of briefings from the US ambassador to NATO, indicating that the Russians are engaged in operations in Eastern Europe and working to draw Turkey out of NATO, and that China is also making incursions into Eastern Europe, largely through economic investment.

The Trump-Putin meeting, the only area where there is a set of issues that is going to get some action and agreement is the situation in Syria. Trump is going to talk to the Russians about what they can do to limit Iran's role inside Syria. Russia is in a kind of a unique broker position where they deal with both Iran and Israel. The Israelis want to keep the Iranians and Hezbollah out Syrian areas that border Israel and the occupied Golan Heights.

The other very dangerous issue is reopening the process of disarmament negotiations, because both sides are on hair-trigger, launch-on-warning, and our ability to detect incoming missiles is vulnerable to cyber-attack. The US-Russia relationship has reached a kind of low point, and I think it's wise that President Trump is trying to move it back up.

The Russians have told the US that we want nuclear disarmament talks to resume, but they now have to be three-way. In any new round of nuclear disarmament, China has to at least be brought into the discussion, so that they can be transparent about the size and scope of their program.

Questioner4:

Something that's happening in the US is the idea that the use of tactical nuclear weapons is rational. Nobody thought that the escalation problem is at all there. That's a dangerous step.

Steinberg:

The Obama administration developed a strategy for a \$1 trillion modernization program for the US nuclear arsenal, over the next 10 years. One aspect of it is that tactical nuclear weapons are defined as battlefield weapons. They are being significantly upgraded for longer distance, and have tail launch capabilities, so they can be fired from fighter planes. The separation between nuclear and conventional is now being blurred, and the Russians have indicated that they are doing the same thing. There are urgent strategic issues that need to be discussed, before it's far too late to deal with them.

Questioner5:

How serious Mr. Trump is about making a commitment to the alliance in Asia? Does he have any perspective other than a trade deal with China? Is he willing to make more concessions to China?

Steinberg:

We're on the verge of a potential escalation in a trade war with China. President Trump has had a number of positive and successful meetings with Xi Jinping, but at the same time, he came to the conclusion that China is trying to slow down the process with North Korea. Trump doesn't draw a separation between issues relating to trade and those relating to North Korea. We don't know what happened in those meetings between Xi Jinping and Kim. We do know that whereas the initial diplomacy with North Korea

had excluded China, they masterfully put themselves in the middle. Some people have said that it's a tit-for-tat game, where we raise tariffs by \$34 billion, and the Chinese do too. But China is doing a lot more that may be above the president's level of understanding, but it is not above the level of a lot of other people inside the US national security system.

Deng Xiaoping said we will recover from the Cultural Revolution and the degradation of the Chinese economy and society, and we're going to be quiet and nonthreatening. But now Xi Jinping is saying that the Chinese system is superior to western democracy, that the west can't get anything done because of elections and checks and balances in the political system.

China has made some very dramatic and impressive accomplishments. But they are now coming out and openly saying that the Chinese system is superior. And this is one of the fundamental points I want you all to take away from this discussion, which is that Japan is a critical partner to the United States to adequately manage this new emerging strategic reality of a much more assertive, global China. This is something that poses a very big challenge, but if this US-Japanese cooperation really develops, then China is going to have incentives to be cooperative.

The Chinese have a vested interest in working with the US, Japan and South Korea on the denuclearization of North Korea. Otherwise, within two years Japan and South Korea will have nuclear capabilities, or a more robust American nuclear umbrella, and that's not the China strategic advantage.

Is the trade war going to go on indefinitely? There are areas where China has a net disadvantage over the United States, and the Chinese are smart enough to realize. I'm more of the view that some of these issues are going to balance out, but you can never dismiss the idea that something could derail things.

Kotegawa:

Could you name the congressman who had already announced their retirement? I think an incumbent in South Carolina?

Steinberg:

It's a long list and growing by the day. Paul Ryan has not only resigned, he's not running for re-election. I think that in a certain sense that's symbolic of a whole number

of others. There are many reasons why a large number of members of Congress are frustrated. Jeff Flake, from Arizona got into head-to-head confrontation with the president, and I'm sure that a number of people said for the good of the party you should leave. The president wants people in who are more to his liking.

Some people have just been in there too long, and you have a younger generation coming in. This is a shift that's now just beginning and it's going to take a decade for it to play out, to see what the consequences are.

Kotegawa:

Thank you Jeff. And I would like to ask for the audience to give him a very big warm applause.