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## Why global media could have it wrong again

Mushtaq Khan, June 19, 2018

In the **doctored papers** office, CNN is a perpetual presence. The summit meeting between Kim Jong-un and President Trump on June 12, was eagerly anticipated by the global media. However, the assessment of the meeting – specifically CNN’s view – left us bewildered. At times it almost seemed as if CNN’s anchors and experts were unhinged – they were shocked, dismissive, and sometimes angry.

We find this surprising. After all, the threats being traded between Trump and Kim in early 2018, raised the nuclear alarm to levels last witnessed in the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962. *Fire and Fury* was promised by President Trump, while Kim Jong-un hinted that above ground nuclear tests around the US island of Guam may be required. Watching these two leaders now smiling and shaking hands in an unmistakable show of warmth, should have been celebrated globally. It wasn’t.

### The narrative

CNN’s anchors and experts focused on the following:

- How could President Trump so warmly receive the North Korean leader, given Kim Jong-un’s atrocious human rights record? There were frequent reminders of how the North Korean leader had his uncle and half-brother killed, and how his Defence Minister was executed using an anti-aircraft gun. There were also discussions of the labor camps that still exist in North Korea;
- Kim Jong-un was repeatedly described as a brutal dictator and a murderer;
- That his repressive regime deprives North Koreans of social media and access to global news channels;
- How Kim Jong-un’s father and grandfather also sought peaceful relations with the West, but these amounted to little when they reneged on promises they had made. Similarly, the agreement signed by Chairman Kim and President Trump is vague and inconclusive. There was also a running commentary that Kim Jong-un has not promised anything new compared to the past;
- Kim Jong-un got the upper-hand by securing a no-strike commitment from the US, and a promise that US-South Korean military exercises will stop (the latter was done without informing South Korea). This angered many experts, who felt that President Trump unilaterally conceded important bargaining chips. Snide comments were made about Trump’s deal-making prowess;
- In the much anticipated photo-op, the US and North Korea had six flags each, which signals equal status of the two countries;
- That President Trump would work towards the return of US military personnel from South Korea; &
- The stark difference in body-language (and words) between Trump and Prime Minister Trudeau just days earlier. There were repeated references that President Trump is more comfortable dealing with authoritarian leaders like Kim Jong-un, Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin, than democratically elected leaders like Angela Merkel or Justin Trudeau.

Other issues that gained airtime were:

- The comment made by Trump that Putin should be invited back into the G7, which signaled that Russia’s invasion of Crimea was forgiven;
- That senior members of the Trump administration are contemplating leaving, as they feel their views are being ignored as President Trump becomes more comfortable in the Oval Office; &

- That Trump's *gut-feel* approach to foreign policy, is a calculated effort to divert attention from the mounting political challenges that President Trump faces at home.<sup>1</sup>

Returning to the Kim-Trump summit, one would have expected less negativity. The summit was not meant to forgive and forget past behavior, but was an ice-breaker between two temperamental leaders who had come close to a nuclear flashpoint. However, the narrative from the liberal media remains skeptical.

### **Mid-term elections in November 2018**

The press conference after the summit gave President Trump another opportunity to target CNN. In our view, it now appears that CNN is slightly more belligerent as it realizes the current media coverage will influence the mid-term elections in November. Before the summit was a story, there was a sense that Democrats were grooming fresh candidates to motivate their constituencies using President Trump's controversial policies. A concerted effort to identify motivated individuals to challenge seasoned Republicans was viewed as the best way to put an end to Trump by winning control of both the House of Representatives and the Senate.

The earlier thinking that a Democrat majority could pave the way for impeachment, has been abandoned as this strategy would only embolden Trump's base. Democratic candidates are now issue-centric and not focused on President Trump's tribalistic instincts. Nevertheless, there is a nagging sense that the mid-term elections will not be about the candidates or the issues, but a calculated Republican strategy to make the November elections about President Trump alone.

This suits Donald Trump. If his frank talk about US dysfunction got him into the Oval Office, being divisive about immigration, trade and the cost of being the world's policeman, could give the Republican Party an edge in November. In our view, Trump's popularity within the Republican Party is remarkably robust precisely for this reason. Divisive rhetoric adds impetus to tribal thinking, which could overshadow the loss of US prestige in the world. In fact, the forthcoming political campaign could regress to the point where a significant number of American voters would be energized by global criticism.

The question is whether Donald Trump could pull off another surprise in November 2018.

### **The issues that will decide the mid-term elections**

The list of policy grievances aired by the liberal media keeps growing. What is galling is that Trump's White House is more than willing to double down when criticized. If we focus on key policy issues like immigration, trade and foreign policy (i.e. slighting friends and embracing dictators), the election outlook is not that clear.

#### ***Immigration:***

The global outrage at the forceful separation (by US border patrol) of migrating parents from their children, is now the dominant news story. Many respected opinion-formers have condemned this policy, with some claiming this mocks the *tabula ansata* (charter) held by the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor. There is no denying the anger and sadness this has provoked in America, but it does give voice

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<sup>1</sup> For example: the Mueller investigation; how US immigration policy is being prosecuted; the economic fallout (on the US) as Europe, China and Canada respond to US tariffs; and the watered down Dodd-Frank Bill (2010) which means financial institutions are once again able to take risks that almost bankrupted the US financial system in 2008.

to the anxiety felt by many who voted for Donald Trump in 2016. One must recall that Mexican immigrants and the need for The Wall on the southern border, were defining themes for Candidate Trump.

On June 18, President Trump clarified that he will not allow the US to become a “migrant camp” or a “refugee holding facility”. He went on to blame the Democrats for the existing policy, assuring his base that he is only implementing their policies. Trump has repeatedly referred to the immigration crisis in Europe, and exaggerated some incidents to prove that uncontrolled immigration can (and will) undermine the cultural characteristics of the host country. President Trump will use this issue, and the emotions it generates, to push for a budget allocation to build The Wall.

Despite the heart-wrenching stories that are playing on media channels and social media, maintaining a tough stance on illegal immigration will play well with Trump supporters in the southern states. Republican hopefuls for November have no choice but to follow the Trump lead. They will need to embrace divisive politics, if they seek to win.

### *Trade war:*

Even members of Trump’s cabinet know that US tariffs will harm the US economy. But none will speak up against it, as this runs counter to the election campaign that Trump (and his off-site ideologue – Steve Bannon) is gearing up for. As discussed in an earlier paper (*The Trump Phenomenon*, September 28, 2016), Donald Trump has created a grass-root support base that is unprecedented in modern American politics. By appealing to a golden past of American industrial might (1950s to the 1980s), Trump has tapped into a groundswell of public anxiety (and anger) that could overshadow cold, hard facts.

While major European countries, China, Mexico and Canada, have weighed in with retaliatory tariffs that specifically target *Red* states, we do not see the likely economic pain diverting President Trump away from a trade war. The tariffs imposed on US exports will be used to make a self-fulfilling point: US trade partners (especially allies) have been taking advantage of America for decades, and the retaliatory tariffs reveal what *these* allies will do to get back to how things were. In Trump’s rhetoric, this means keeping America’s manufacturing base weak, while allies run large trade surpluses that keep the US in debt.

This narrative will gain more traction as the mid-terms approach, and there is some logic to it. Trade barriers – like free trade – create winners and losers. As discussed in the above paper, since Trump’s base has not gained from globalization, demanding a larger share of the pie – even when the pie is not growing – is a better bet than allowing things to continue as before. This means that even if they cannot point to a material improvement in their living standards, tribal sentiments will still be energized if the other side (the *haves*) is hurting more.<sup>2</sup> As we concluded:

*The economic rationale for free trade is undisputed in theory, ... but it assumes a seamless socio-economic transition. As millions of Americans are now reminding us, this does not happen in the real world. In terms of the elections on November 8<sup>th</sup>, even if Trump loses, the movement he has energized is unlikely to disappear from America’s political landscape.<sup>3</sup>*

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<sup>2</sup> We had talked about how policy measures to protect blue-collar jobs in the US, could be used by other countries to placate their own constituencies. This could abruptly halt the gains from globalization, and highlights the potential trade-off between economic efficiency and economic equity.

<sup>3</sup> *The Trump Phenomenon*, September 28, 2016, page 5.

### **Foreign policy:**

US foreign policy is clearly driven by President Trump. The incredulity associated with the concessions made by President Trump to Kim Jong-un, reflects the sense of shock and anxiety of the US *establishment*. Trump's loose talk that the nuclear threat from North Korea is over, and how subsequent negotiations would ensure the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, and possibly end the US military presence in South Korea, appears to be a White House view. Without saying it, this could be the first step towards reversing *Pax Americana*.<sup>4</sup>

In our view, President Trump's foreign policy is formulated to support his domestic economic policy. He has repeatedly stated that close allies (the EU) maintain an unfair trade advantage over the US, and yet do not pay their share for the security provided by the US. From his point of view, America's global responsibility (i.e. luggage) has enriched its allies at the expense of blue-collar American workers. Hence, the US should free itself from its global responsibilities and protect its workers, even if the rest of the world disapproves.<sup>5</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Donald Trump is not an ideologue or a statesman – he is a media personality, who knows that the executive power he enjoys is derived from people's support. Even after 500 days in office, President Trump is still campaigning, aware that he beat the odds in 2016, and could do it again in November 2018. In our view, Trump is likely to be omnipresent as the mid-term campaigns gain momentum – the showdown will only be about him, and his policies.

The visceral reaction of the global media, and the pace of developments regarding the Russia Investigation, indicate that Trump's opponents have realized that the Republican Party could do well in the mid-terms, which makes it more likely that Donald Trump is re-elected. His challenge to the world order will be resisted, especially by the US establishment. However, as we have discussed in past papers about Brexit and Trump<sup>6</sup>, the political systems in both the US and Europe had lost the pulse of their people, as political parties on both sides of the Atlantic became centrists as they embraced globalization.

In reaction to this, populist politicians from both the far left and the far right have gained power in Central and Eastern Europe. They are inspired by President Trump's policies, and show deference for President Putin's style. With this backdrop, Donald Trump will continue to play hardball, while the liberal media will remain fixated on the injustice towards immigrants, the mistreatment of allies, and US concessions in the global order. If Trump's policy agenda allows the Republicans to retain their majority in Congress, it will make his second term more likely.

As seen in the 2016 presidential elections, the stream of negative news about Donald Trump did not take him out of contention. The issue is, with President Trump pushing divisive policies with a sense of relish, could the global media get it wrong again?

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<sup>4</sup> This post-WW2 world order refers to the peace and order created (and enforced) by the US. As the global policeman, the US sought to protect the rebuilding of Europe and Japan (via the Marshall Plan) to withstand the military and economic power (and ambitions) of the Soviet Union. An unspoken (and unscripted) part of this arrangement, was that the US would carry the financial and material burden of this enforcement. Donald Trump has questioned this arrangement even before he became a presidential candidate. Since taking office, President Trump has stated that NATO allies need to pay more for the US security umbrella, and also justified the end of the US-South Korean military exercises, as being too expensive.

<sup>5</sup> While Trump's base may be enthusiastic about a muscular military presence, foreign entanglements (Afghanistan, Iraq) take a heavier toll on this segment of the American population. President Trump is keen on projecting US power, but not that keen on getting militarily involved.

<sup>6</sup> *Brexit: Why the 23<sup>rd</sup> June Referendum is just the beginning*, June 14, 2016.