

NEMESIS

The convulsions wracking the American body politic inescapably impact the nation's foreign relations. For the United States today is in a condition that defies all conventional categories. Its leader(s) are abnormal, its government is abnormal, its conduct is abnormal – and, perhaps, its society itself is abnormal. Donald Trump is a malignant narcissist compounded by extreme megalomania; Elon Musk, his Co-President, is also a megalomaniac neo-Fascist with Nazi affinities – a Hitler salute is a Hitler salute.¹ Together, they have launched a no-holds-barred campaign to impose on the country an autocratic yoke that aims to control and dictate in accordance with their primitive dogmas and destructive impulses. Already, the United States' Constitutional republic is badly wounded, its hallowed public institutions assaulted, its democratic political culture corrupted. Their restoration is highly improbable. An immediate consequence is to mutilate further America's moral standing buried in the rubble of Gaza, to dissolve the last shreds of its soft power, to transform its vaunted image as "The City on a Hill" into a model of what you don't want to become. Instead, Trump's I & II have emboldened neo-Fascists worldwide to act as their instincts tell them: Bolsonaro in Brazil, Milei in Argentina, Modi in India, Erdogan in Turkiye and a host of other minor power wielders. In contrast, what nation's responsible leadership wants to emulate the United States *circa* 2025?

NARCISSIST PRAXIS

A narcissist's behavior is more compulsive than calculated. It affirms three overriding needs: The first is to gather the power to control others and one's environs. That serves a dual purpose: feeding the desire for adulation, and for ensuring that those persons cannot do anything to you that undermines the exalted sense of self. The second is to create situations, and to surround oneself with courtiers, where that sacred self is celebrated – a hunger that never is satiated. Third, to destroy whatever or whomever is felt to threaten or obstruct fulfillment of those drives: rivals, critics, the recalcitrant. These traits make permanent relationships extremely difficult since anybody can become prey were an action of theirs to pierce the multiple mental barriers in place to protect what is in essence a fragile core self. The same applies to fixed commitments. Therefore, a full-blown narcissistic can never be counted on to honor a pledge, to keep a promise or to abide by a treaty. Trump's entire career is marked by deceit, lies, cheating and a skirting of the law confirms that judgment. He is totally untrustworthy

The implication is that any party dealing with the Trump administration must be ultra cautious by insisting that any agreement is nailed down as concretely as possible. A large security deposit and valuable collateral are obligatory. Russian leaders are well aware of this given their experience of being deceived repeatedly by the U.S. and its partners since 1991. (Sergei Lavrov yesterday: "*Words are not enough.*" Moreover, Putin himself gives every evidence of understanding the peculiar psychology of the man. The same can be said of China's Xi. The governments most susceptible to falling victim to Trump's ploys are those needy of external aide of one kind or another – thus, vulnerable to America's pressure tactics. And, of course, any national leader who remains deluded about the man's true nature. Trump's predatory instincts are aroused by the weak and the craven – be it a Chuck Schumer at home or a Olaf Schulz abroad. The pleasure in debasing them is a fringe benefit of power. Moreover, he can be expected to apply his bullying to as many parties as catch his attention (the above noted apart). There is no proportionality between the target's intrinsic worth and how extreme the measure of coercion he is prepared to apply. A Chinese company at the Panama Canal – invasion. The potential riches of exploitable natural resources in Greenland – demand that long-time friend Denmark hand it over or risk economic sanctions. Canada's insistence on maintaining its independence existence when turning its *de facto* interdependence with the U.S. into *de jure* integration would aggrandize America – tariffs and threat of outright import restrictions. The criterion is not something objective; rather, it is whatever Trump feels will add to his grandiose visions or some irritating action that gets under his skin.

To understand these flights of fancy, we should note the abundance of evidence that Trump's grip on reality is fragile. His mind resides in a virtual reality that shutters perceptions of actual reality. As has been said in another context, ***"his own grip on truth or falsity is so fluid, so subservient to his desires, that it matters little to him what is true and what is false; so he is able to act as if something is true if that serves his purposes best. Belief has become a creature of his will: he will treat an unfounded suspicion as if it were a Cartesian certainty. He has contempt for people who are candid and trusting, who can respect the truth."***²

What Trump craves are gratifications not constructive accomplishments that are tangible &/or enduring. It is a mistake to presume that Trump has thought out plans or strategies about anything. His behavior is dictated by the syncopation of his compulsions. Narcissists live their lives to the pulse of any inner beat: *I need, I want, I need, I want*. Empathy is foreign to narcissists. They have neither the capacity nor the

inclination to relate to others except at a very superficial level.³ Trump harbors no clear conception of the America that he is transforming in tumult and disarray, no mental model of how that disassembled America is to be recast. The same holds for foreign affairs. To pose the question: what is his goal? How does he view the global 'system'? Where do individual actions fit into a broad, long-term strategy? is to misunderstand Trump and what makes him tick. There are no answers because he is incapable both psychologically and intellectually of thinking along those lines. A couple of things can be said about what sort of environment best suits him. First, the two fixed points of reference are further exhalation of self, and expanding the tangible benefits that the United States derives from all its external relations. The former is unlimited; the latter is thought of in narrow, short-term ways. Trump doesn't give a fig about the well-being of other countries (with the glaring exception of Israel) nor does he concern himself with how the impact on them of his deeds and misdeeds could redound to the disadvantage of the United States. Equally, there is no regard to the overall ordering of international affairs. He is neither a liberal believer in promoting multilateral world institutions to create a measure of stability and to perform certain basic system maintenance functions nor imperial in his designs. The latter doesn't appeal to him since he abhors the thought of taking any sort of responsibility for others. Both approaches entail commitments that are utterly alien to him. His mercurial, impulsive *modus operandi* demands absolute freedom to act how, where and when he wants. A world in flux doesn't faze him; indeed, that is an environment rich in opportunities for buccaneering. In that respect, Trump has more in common with Captain Kidd or Clive of India than he does with Bismarck. Grab what you can – whatever the commodity, e.g. mineral rights.

RUSSIA/UKRAINE

How doesn't Trump's surprisingly warm embrace of Vladimir Putin along with expressions of support for Russia's interpretation of the Ukraine crisis reconcile with the portrait of the man sketched above? Some suggest it reflects a statesmanlike side to him that otherwise is not visible. Others opine that Putin has found ways to beguile him. Are these conjectures credible? I think not. Let's bear in mind that Trump has always been attracted to strong men who exercise power forcefully. Engaging with them *mano y mano* exalts his own sense of exceptional prowess.

Deep down, Trump is an insecure person who requires a) adulation and b) constant demonstrations of his potency. The latter is expressed in his characteristic style of bullying, disparagement of others, and the relishing of contrived 'wins.' Putin, he instinctively realizes, is superior to him - in all respects: intelligence, range of knowledge, erudition, articulateness, political skills, diplomatic skills. Dealing on an

equal basis with such a man massages Trump's inflated ego. **The content of the practical dealings is less important than the engagement. Trump need not emerge from these dealings as a 'winner,' but he could not tolerate being seen as the 'loser.'** Hence, Putin faces the delicate challenge at once of avoiding concessions designed to flatter and protect Trump's self-image while not conceding anything of consequence re. Russian interests. He seems aware of this; hence, his emollient manner in addressing Trump. **The crunch will come on Ukraine.**

Trump has made a sudden commitment to the termination of the open-ended Ukraine project of exploiting that benighted country as a weapon for subordinating Russia. He recognizes – more by instinct than rigorous analysis – that it is a catastrophic failure, and that reversion from it is called for. Let us bear in mind, though, that the campaign that was launched by Barack Obama in 2014 was deepened by Trump I who generously armed the Ukrainian military, and built up the powerful army that was poised to invade the breakaway Russophile Oblasts of the Donbass, following a plan drafted by the Pentagon. Only nine months after he left office it was activated by Joe Biden. At that time, Trump shared an overwhelming consensus by the country's political class that taking on Russia in the Ukraine served major American national interests. Several of Trump's appointees have been vocal promoters of the campaign.

Trump is anything but a natural conciliator and humanitarian – as evinced by his mad design for extirpating the Palestinians, his bullying of every country friend or foe in sight, and his confrontational approach toward China. The expediency of calming relations with Russia has much to do with the girding of loins for the priority given aggressive campaigns in the Middle East and East Asia rather than earnest concern for European peace. **Trump came to see Ukraine as a financial investment that went sour. So, you blame your agents for the failure and grab whatever tangible assets are lying around. He never will admit that our aid in fact was spent to make possible the spilling of Ukrainian blood for American purposes. *Mea Culpa* is not in his vocabulary**

The sobering truth is that Trump's overriding desire is to be in the limelight, to be praised, to be seen as a winner. So, being hailed as the Great Peacemaker (Ukraine) would be as gratifying as being acclaimed as the Great War Leader (Iran). Fame is fungible for him.

At the more practical level, the White House notion as to what should be the basis for an agreement with Russia bears no relation to the realities on the ground or to the Kremlin's oft-repeated statement of its unnegotiable core objectives. Trump will not be happy with terms, however dressed up, that constitute a clear humiliation of the U.S.

Ignorance, and fantasy, attaches to the proposal of a ceasefire which makes zero sense from a Moscow perspective. Simply put, the White House has no viable plan to bring peace to Ukraine, much less a conception for a redesigned pan-European security system as viewed by Russia as the *sine qua non* for continental peace and stability. So, when the White House and the Kremlin get down to talking about concrete issues, and the wider question of reconstructing European security institutions, real comity will be illusory. At present, the two parties have conceptions of the outcome that are incompatible.

How will Trump react when his simplistic ideas for ending the war prove to be fanciful? Find a scapegoat – Biden, Zelensky, the Europeans?

Concoct another fictional narrative eagerly spread by credulous mass media? (This second in combination with the first?) Create a noisy distraction (attack Iran, rename the Washinton Monument the TRUMP MONUMENT)?

[Trump's publicly expressed views sympathetic to Russia on the Ukraine also may have something to do with electoral considerations. In 2016, Trump gained advantage from denouncing the Democrats' forever wars, e.g. Afghanistan. Outflanking Hillary on that (and her alleged being soft on Wall St) may have made the difference. Perhaps, he or his advisers had the notion that they could siphon off some disaffected Democratic voters by substituting Ukraine for Afghanistan. Once having committed himself this way, Trump as President could not easily reverse course on a dime - and for the reasons cited above, was comfortable pursuing a deal with Putin.]

In the total absence of any sort of superego or any firm convictions, the only constant in Trump's makeup is respect for the raw power of another party who has the demonstrated will to use it. The odd coupling with Elon Musk is further indication of that disposition. Equally, there is a long record of Trump either keeping his distance from anybody who seriously can hurt him or treating them with circumspection. That is a *partial* explanation for his accommodating attitude toward Putin. Does the same hold for China and Xi? There, Trump equivocates. He sees in a China a rival to American paramountcy – as does the near entire American foreign policy community. He accuses its of mistreating the United States, especially on trade and commercial matters generally. He has taken several audacious steps against it - going back to the Trump I administration. Yet, at the same time he occasionally conjures a vision of a *modus vivendi* grounded on a newly equilibrated relationship which is weighed in favor if the United States. In addition, he respects Xi as the type of strong, forceful leader he admires. So, we might expect a confrontational stance in the economic sphere, but a reluctance to raise further tensions over Taiwan. Trump is hyperaggressive; he also is a coward who deep down is afraid of getting bloodied. Consider his reaction when, in the

debate with Kamala Harris, he had all of his sordid record and actions thrown in his face. Trump sulked and then immediately cancelled subsequent bouts. Hence, this is not a man who hankers for a test of arms with a powerful opponent – nor a warmonger. Most likely, we will witness much pawing of the earth, but no charge.

The same cowardness militates against his starting a war with Iran. Despite all the blustering threats of recent weeks, Trump suddenly tweets that an understanding with Tehran about its nuclear program just might be in the cards. A changeability that stems from a readiness to contradict himself as if turning on a dime as well as his deep fear of actually getting into a dangerous brawl with someone who hits back (as none of his domestic opponents/rivals/victims do).

Trump's penchant for treating directly with strong leaders of strong states – Putin, Xi, Modi – has led some analysts to wonder whether that could be the basis for a strategy of fostering a concert among them. That could be seen as encompassing an informal set of understandings on rules of the road and convergent interests in promoting stability through a collaborative superintending of world affairs. A version of the imagined concert that allows for hard bargaining and a good measure of rivalry for the arrangement to conform to Trump's aberrant temperament and behavior. That, though, would reduce its effectiveness and jeopardize its stability. So, an intriguing idea – but unrealistic on a number of counts. One, the Trump national security team lack the diplomatic skills and aptitude to launch such a sophisticated, multifaceted project and to nurture it over the years required to bring it to fruition. Two, other leaders are unlikely to place the requisite trust in an erratic, obsessive and narcissistic a person as Trump. Three, in light of the United States' commitment to keeping an outsized role in managing the world's affairs, there are certain to arise points of friction that will erode the underlying consensus and goodwill critical for the concert to work.

NOTES

1. Last week, Musk's daughter affirmed in a public statement that her father indeed was making the Nazi salute. Just a few weeks earlier, Steve Bannon – who did more than anybody else to get Trump elected in 2016 - too gave the Nazi salute from the dais of an international gathering of far-Right movements. Swastikas and other Nazi symbols are prevalent at MAGA rallies; Trump himself tacitly has given his benediction to neo-Nazi outfits like Proud Boys and Neo-Aryans.

2. Shakespeare OTHELLO

2. 3. A narcissist like Trump seeks to animate others with his demented energy, grandiose plans, and megalomaniacal projects. An adrenaline junkie, his world is a whirlwind of comings and goings, reunions and divorces. A narcissist is like a child in his frenetic restlessness. It is a form of 'primitivization,' as Eric Hoffer has called it. *"By plunging into ceaseless action and hustling," the person never matures. "People in a hurry can neither grow nor decay; they are preserved in a state of perpetual puerility."*

The narcissist is the self-appointed gatekeeper to reality; deciding what is, what happened, what did not happen, how it happened, whether important or not, who is who. What counts most is how it is recorded. The tree that falls in the forest with no one around surely makes a sound, but that event has little meaning unless *I* am there to register it. In fact, my being there is the main news.