

Donald Trump has a strong foreign-policy hand, but could blow it

FOR the spies, diplomats and military types tasked with keeping America safe and prosperous, Donald Trump's bullying long ago lost its power to shock. Indeed, the national-security establishment—including officials who currently serve President Joe Biden—concedes that Mr Trump's brand of statecraft, involving America First bombast, cruel jokes and offers that can't be refused, is at times effective. Mr Trump's ability to generate leverage leads to a different lament. Shrewd professionals worry that the 47th president has a potentially strong hand, but might blow it.

Mr Trump's foreign-policy pronouncements on January 7th at his Florida residence, Mar-a-Lago, were a case in point. At moments he mangled facts like a rich uncle at Thanksgiving dinner, falsely claiming that China controls the Panama Canal and hinting that America might have to “do something” about that. Yet he also showed off a salesman's knack for spotting unhappy punters possibly open to a new deal. In this case some of Greenland's 56,000 people chafe under semi-colonial rule from Denmark. Mr Trump's demand that Denmark sell the resource-rich island to America or face “very high” tariffs might be a show for supporters or a ploy to soften up allies. But it touches on a real dissatisfaction.

To be clear, Mr Trump's land-grabbing bluster is a propaganda win for aggressors such as Russia's president, Vladimir Putin. But Mr Trump did actual harm by saying that he can “understand” why Russia feels threatened by potential NATO membership for Ukraine—endorsing a key Kremlin argument ahead of peace talks that he said could end the Ukraine war in six months.

Mr Trump's ability to amass and squander leverage is at the heart of messages that the Biden administration hopes to pass to its successor. This will be a struggle, for serving and former officials concede that Mr Trump and his team view Mr Biden's foreign-

policy record with scorn. For all that, some messages may get through. Mr Trump's chosen national security adviser, [Mike Waltz](#), has been talking intensively to the incumbent, Jake Sullivan. Mr Trump and top aides are consuming top-secret intelligence from America's spy agencies.

Transitions between political parties can be productive as well as fraught, argues Rick Waters, who in nearly three decades as a career diplomat served on the National Security Council of President George W. Bush, and from 2021 to 2023 co-ordinated China policy at the State Department. When one party stays in office, it can be hard to question settled policies. Newcomers have an interest in learning about looming crises, secret negotiations and other "things that are not obvious outside government".

Grown-ups in the Biden team and Trump-world agree on more than some might expect. They concur that Mr Trump's impatience with Ukraine gives him power over President Volodymyr Zelensky. It may even give Mr Zelensky a political excuse to enter negotiations that involve the loss of some territory—an endgame that Mr Biden's team, like Mr Trump's, considers inevitable. The message from the outgoing Biden team involves the need for corresponding leverage over Mr Putin. In their telling, for the fighting to end soon Mr Trump must be willing to let the war run, otherwise Mr Putin will think he can wait America out. Knowing that this advice is unwelcome, some in Biden-world draw analogies with America's chaotic departure from Afghanistan, and ask whether Mr Trump wants to preside over comparable failure in Ukraine.

On the Middle East, the Biden team agrees with Trump aides that Iran is weaker than in decades. The devastation by Israel of its proxies, Hizbullah and Hamas, and the collapse of the Assad regime in Syria, offer a huge strategic opportunity. That may help Mr Trump with his goal of normalising relations between Israel and Arab states, including the great prize, Saudi Arabia. The Biden team has risks to flag, too. Islamists could end up controlling Syria. Should Mr Trump push regime change in Iran, that overreach will undermine American leverage regionally. Iranian vulnerability could lead the regime to sprint for nuclear weapons.

Mr Trump has generated leverage over China. Chinese leaders are braced for pressure over their industrial policies, trade practices and the modernisation of the People's Liberation Army. Global markets have priced in some disruption. All this gives Mr

Trump negotiating clout. The question is how to use it. Trump aides will hear that Chinese leaders are resigned to attempts to rebalance the US-China trade relationship, but will respond fiercely if the Communist Party's legitimacy is questioned. Meanwhile, China's levers of retaliation should be taken seriously, as should its rampant hacking and spying on American infrastructure.

Away from the TV lights

Whether they listen or not, Trump aides will hear how Team Biden views the axis of adversaries formed by China, Iran, North Korea and Russia. Co-operation between the four is real and dangerous, they will hear, but China is also an outlier. China has a stake in a stable international order. The other three have little to lose. The advice is for America to impose costs on China, without binding it more tightly to the axis. Space warfare offers an example. Some time ago, America spotted that Russia might deploy a satellite-killing nuclear device in space. Mr Biden's team urged China to warn Russia against such a terrible idea.

Finally, national security involves a lot of hard, thankless work. Biden aides have warned their successors that two differently failing states, Haiti and Venezuela, may soon generate flows of migrants to America. They have messages to share about AI governance and AI diffusion, meaning the tricky business of deciding which technologies to sell to which countries. These are dull problems that cannot be bullied away, but may shape the coming world. Wish the grown-ups luck.