



No Way to Run a Superpower

Adam Garfinkle



RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical and contemporary issues. The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due credit to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email to Editor RSIS Commentary at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.

No Way to Run a Superpower

By Adam Garfinkle

SYNOPSIS

The foreign and national security policy looks to be in troubling disarray due to radical process dysfunction originating in the Oval Office of the White House in Washington, D.C. A recent policy flip-flop illustrates the problem but hardly exhausts it.

COMMENTARY

My May 20 *RSIS Commentary* [112/2025](#) essay “Trump’s Flip-Floppery on the Ukraine-Russia War” described how the Trump 2.0 Administration’s betrayal of Ukraine and apparent alignment with Russia that emerged rapidly during the Administration’s early months – complete with arms supply and Starlink system cut-offs in early March – seemed subject to reappraisal by mid-March, but then vanished almost as soon as it became discernible.

By mid-April the Administration’s rhetoric, while not as acerbically anti-Ukraine and pro-Russia as before, seemed aimlessly stranded in between. By mid-May administration policy appeared to lean toward Kyiv, likely as a result of the signing of the US-Ukraine rare-earth minerals “deal” on April 30. But no sober soul was wagering heavy on what might happen next.

As unclear as US policy was, the pattern it illustrated was all *too* clear; indeed, not only has it persisted, it has become more pronounced.

After the NATO Summit

President Donald Trump returned from the annual NATO Summit on June 24 with, he declared the next day, a more positive view of NATO and a less benign view of Russian motives and methods in the war. NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte, who

orchestrated a fawning song-and-dance routine for Trump in The Hague, must have been thrilled with his apparent conquest.

But before Rutte and the rest of the EU cast could stop smirking over their theatrical coup, Trump, it seemed at the time, ordered critical ammunition for Ukraine – including Patriot missile system materiel the Ukrainian military can get only from the United States, and that is key to protecting civilian population centres – withheld on the pretext the US stocks of those weapons were running too low. The withheld ordnance included most of the same items Trump had summarily shut off back in early March, only to resume shipments a few days later.

For a day or two it seemed a safe assumption among the commentariat that this third ammunition shut-off would not be reversed and resumed. *Whoops!* A new breeze blew, and Trump again changed course. “They have to be able to defend themselves,” the President wrote, referring to the Ukrainians. “They’re getting hit very hard now.” He soon added: “We get a lot of bullshit thrown at us by Putin, if you want to know the truth. He’s very nice to us all the time, but it turns out to be meaningless.” How odd that the President was the first to figure this out....

The Wages of Process Dysfunction

The Ukraine-Russia theatre is of course not the only example of the Trump 2.0 Administration’s weathervaning decision process, or what passes for a process. We saw it with the April 2-9 “Liberation Day” tariffs debacle, and we saw it last month again in the context of the recent so-called Twelve Day War, during which President Trump shifted within a 48-hour period from “The US had nothing to do with the attack on Iran tonight” to “We now have complete and total control of the skies over Iran....Nobody does it better than the good ol’ USA” – as if US forces at that point yet had anything to do with the existing state of military play.

How to explain such erratic behaviour? Simple: We behold a nearly complete process incoherence in the Trump 2.0 Administration, and it is truly “like nothing we’ve ever seen before,” to invoke a phrase dear to Trump’s heart.

The second Trump Administration is more top-heavy now in centring on the President than during the first term, and the President is not waiting for any talking point or media feed from his officials. He lacks even a full-time National Security Advisor to coordinate anything since Mike Waltz was exiled to the United Nations as the American ambassador in early May. With this vacuum, even associates without any portfolio but having Oval Office access are wont to whisper in the President’s ear privately. Routine matters thus go neglected, as for example, when on July 9 Liberian President Joseph Boakai was taken aback during an Oval Office visit to find that President Trump knew nothing about Liberia’s origins and history; alas, no one had thought to brief him.

More important than mere embarrassment, key decisions in US foreign and national security policy are now based on whims and counter-whims in place of what used to be a professionally honed inter-agency process.

Whodunit?

So who did shut off the Patriot system materiel for Ukraine this last time around, who persuaded Trump to reverse that decision just 48 hours later, and what might that mean going forward?

As to who again pulled the Ukraine ammunition plug on June 30, and exactly what items were included in the shut-off, administration spokesmen refused to say. But in a lapsed-process, free-for-all characteristic of the Trump 2.0 Administration's policy manner, leaks do tarry long before springing forth.

Politico first reported on July 2 that Elbridge Colby, the Undersecretary of Defence for Policy, ordered the pause. The *Guardian* then reported on July 8 that the decision was rather made by Deputy Defence Secretary Stephen Feinberg, to whom Colby formally reports, and that Secretary Pete Hegseth himself signed off on Feinberg's determination. If that were not merry-go-roundish enough, the President was sitting next to Secretary Hegseth when he told reporters just after the July 8 cabinet meeting that he still knew not who had ordered the Ukraine ammunition pause: "I don't know, why don't you tell me?" As for who informed the President of the shutoff decision and got him to quickly reverse it, no one seems willing to venture a guess.

If Elbridge Colby was indeed behind or at least astride the shut-off decision, the question worth posing would be why an Asia policy specialist, now elevated to the key position of Undersecretary of Defence for Policy, would do such an objectively pro-Putin thing even as the President was indicating a change of heart concerning President Putin. Here, at least, a rare glint of clarity breaks through the process murk.

Colby and the other China-hawks in the Administration believe that a friendly US policy toward Russia will calm Moscow's perennial fears of NATO machinations and thus produce a more stable European security environment beyond Ukraine, and, more important, will in due course draw the Russians away from China, isolating Beijing further in the Eurasian geopolitical space and thus making it easier for the United States to deal with it. Colby probably thought that amid the mayhem he could produce a policy *fait accompli* to the higher benefit of US national interests. If so, he was mistaken. Indeed, probably as a result of the stealth shutoff of military aid to Ukraine. President Trump for the first time on July 11 authorised new aid in an arrangement with NATO.

Whether Colby's view represents sound policy thinking is almost beside the point. He is now facing intense scrutiny for having gotten out ahead of the administration on several major foreign policy decisions and may soon be expelled from the Pentagon. So may Secretary Hegseth be replaced; no one knows, probably not even yet the President. The bottom line is that neither ally nor adversary can put stock in any decision, or even any non-decision, coming out of the Trump 2.0 Administration. This is no way to run a superpower.

Dr Adam Garfinkle is a former Distinguished Visiting Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. He is also the Founding Editor of The American Interest.

S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU Singapore
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798

Please share this publication with your friends. They can subscribe to RSIS publications by scanning the QR Code below.

