

For the good of America, Trump needs to learn the art of diplomacy

By **Michael McFaul** November 6 at 1:31 PM

While President Trump works his way through several countries on his extensive trip in Asia, he is scheduled to hold several “meet-and-greets” with diplomats and other Americans working at our embassies in the region. Whether I was traveling with President Barack Obama and Vice President Joe Biden while working at the White House, or hosting senior officials as an ambassador in Russia, these events were some of my favorites as a government employee. Obama always generated amazing energy, not unlike his campaign events. Embassy staff buzzed for weeks after Secretary of State John Kerry’s supportive words when he first came to the Moscow embassy in the spring of 2013. At a difficult time in U.S.-Russia relations, he made everyone feel proud to be on Team USA. Perhaps my favorite meet-and-greet was when Biden met with our embassy team in Chisinau, Moldova, in the spring of 2011. Everyone brought their families. The vice president paid special attention to the kids, thanking them for their sacrifice to our great country, and stayed well beyond the scheduled time to communicate with emotion his gratitude to everyone for their service. When you have signed up for several years in Chisinau to serve, far away from friends and family, feeling connected to your leadership back home is especially important.

I hope Trump will devote the proper time and thought to make these meet-and-greet events special on his trip; talk with the same passion to our diplomats as he did with our troops in Japan over the weekend. He needs to do so to begin to repair the damage done so far regarding his relationship with our diplomatic corps. For the good of his presidency and the good of our nation, Trump needs to bring our diplomats back on to the team.

Trump started his trip with yet another blundering statement about diplomacy. When asked about the number of senior positions still unfilled at the State Department, Trump responded: “Let me tell you, the one that matters is me ... I’m the only one that matters, because when it comes to it, that’s what the policy is going to be.” Trump then analogized the art of diplomacy to the real estate business: “So, we don’t need all the people that they want. You know, don’t forget, I’m a businessperson. I tell my people, ‘Where you don’t need to fill slots, don’t fill them.’ ”

Those statements of course insulted every Foreign Service officer in the State Department. But Trump’s quip about diplomacy and the making of foreign policy also revealed that he does not yet understand how the process works or is supposed to work.

First, to be effective in diplomacy, presidents need expertise. You would never try to build a Trump Tower without engineers, contractors, accountants and other experts on your team. Why would you try to conduct diplomacy without specialists by your side? Trump did not come to the White House with a lot of foreign policy experience or expertise. None of his top people at the State Department, the Defense Department and the National Security Council have firsthand diplomatic experience either. He needs to hire — and then listen to — diplomatic experts to help him make the big decisions. He cannot do it alone.

Second, there are thousands of foreign policy decisions and diplomatic actions that our government needs to make that should never involve the president. The United States is a global power with interests all over the world. It is both impractical and bad management to have the president involved in all of these decisions. The president has to delegate, both to professionals within the State Department in Washington and also to ambassadors and their staffs around the world.

Third, even if the president and his inner circle made all of the foreign policy decisions, he needs a team of diplomats and those working for other agencies stationed at our embassies to implement these policies. (For instance in Moscow, we had more than two dozen different departments with representatives at the embassy.) Lack of attention to implementation stymies all administrations. Given Trump's proclivities for public pronouncements disconnected from deliberative decision-making, he and his team need to pay special attention to implementation. That can only be done with diplomats on the team. Agents in any large bureaucracy or company will not be incentivized to execute decisions if they are continually disparaged. These inherent problems of execution in large organizations are especially acute in the U.S. government.

Diplomacy is a team sport. You can't make good decisions without expert knowledge regarding individual countries, as well as specialists on security, economics and diplomacy. You can't make all the decisions needed to advance American national interests without delegating decision-making to assistant secretaries and ambassadors.

Hopefully, Trump can learn on this long trip abroad to understand better what he doesn't know, prioritize what decisions he needs to make and those he should not and become better acquainted with those diplomats working in Asia who have knowledge, expertise and experience to help him make and implement better foreign policy decisions. Spending some quality time with our diplomats throughout Asia might help him reevaluate how these great American patriots working abroad can help his administration advance U.S. national interests around the world.

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