

Is this a new Trump? Abrupt reversals may reflect experience

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump is abruptly reversing himself on key issues. And for all his usual bluster, he's startlingly candid about the reason: He's just now really learning about some of them.

"After listening for 10 minutes, I realized it's not so easy," the president said after a discussion with Chinese President Xi Jinping that included his hopes that China's pressure could steer North Korea away from its nuclear efforts.

"I felt pretty strongly that they had a tremendous power" over North Korea, he said in an interview with *The Wall Street Journal*. "But it's not what you would think."

That's just one of several recent comments offering insight into what looks like a moderate make-over for an immoderate president. As he approaches 100 days in office he appears to be increasingly embracing what he describes as his "flexibility" — acknowledging he may not have thought deeply about some of the issues he shouted about throughout his political campaign.

Over the past 48 hours, the outsider politician who pledged to upend Washington has:

- Abandoned his vow to label China a currency manipulator.
- Rethought his hands-off assessment of the Syrian conflict — and ordered a missile attack.
- Turned his warm approach toward Vladimir Putin decidedly chilly and declared U.S.-Russia relations "may be at an all-time low."
- Decided NATO isn't actually obsolete, as he had claimed.
- Realized the U.S. Export-Import Bank is worth keeping around.



President Donald Trump waves as he boards Air Force One before his departure from Andrews Air Force Base, Md., Thursday, to his Mar-a-Largo resort in Florida.

AP Photo/Alex Brandon

"Instinctively, you would say, 'Isn't that a ridiculous thing,'" he said of the bank he once panned as "featherbedding" and pledged to eliminate. He now says of the bank, which supports U.S. exports, "Actually, it's a very good thing. And it actually makes money."

Allies describe Trump as merely growing in the job, taking what he's learning and adapting. The White House, however, is struggling to explain some of the changes.

Asked about the growing list of reversals on Wednesday, spokesman Sean Spicer argued that NATO actually is "evolving toward the president's position," not the other way around, by focusing more on terrorism and encouraging nations to pay more toward defense.

What about flipflops besides NATO? Spicer was asked.

NATO is actually moving toward Trump, he responded

again. Next question.

Trump, who seemed to remain in campaign mode for months after the election, appears to be listening to different advisers now. His onetime campaign guru, Steve Bannon, has been somewhat marginalized while moderate voices grow louder.

It may also be that Trump is merely looking for a way to improve his low approval rating, acknowledging his best tactic could be switching to a less dogmatic, more pragmatic approach.

"Candidates are always bombastic on the campaign trail — and Trump especially. But there is some growing into the office and dealing with the real effects of some of the policies," said Stephen Moore, a conservative economist who helped craft Trump's economic plans.

On the other hand, he warned,

"Candidates are always bombastic on the campaign trail — and Trump especially."

— **Stephen Moore**, Conservative economist who helped draft Trump's economic plans

"if he starts just abandoning his promises, then I think it's going to exact a political toll."

In many cases, Trump's campaign talk appeared born from instinct and little else. He was known as a candidate who rarely dug deep, and he employed few policy experts to inform his views. He's also long boasted of his flexibility, describing his positions as starting points for negotiation — though many of his core ideas, including frustrations over the U.S. trade imbalance, have held steady for years.

Trump, for instance, vowed to label China a currency manipulator,

"They're not currency manipulators," he conceded in the *Wall Street Journal* interview, adding that he was concerned that officially branding them as such could jeopardize his talks with Beijing on confronting North Korea.

Trump's evolution also reflects changing power dynamics within the White House, including the rise of Gary Cohn, his economics chief and the former president of Goldman Sachs, and other more moderate business leaders. Cohn has been looking for ways to fulfill

Trump's campaign promises in ways that are practical and achievable — as opposed to doing things precisely the way the candidate outlined.

That's an attractive prospect for a president eager for the wins he promised — after a difficult first few months that saw much of his agenda, including his signature travel ban and high-profile attempt at overhauling health care, blocked by Congress and the courts.

Trump has also been turning to outside business leaders, including many he's known for years, for guidance. They include billionaire real estate developers Richard LeFrak and Steven Roth, who are informally advising him on infrastructure, and billionaire investor Stephen Schwartzman, the chairman and CEO of the Blackstone Group, who helped organize two major business panels this month to weigh in on possible regulatory and tax changes.

Trump has also won praise for his decision to bomb an air base in Syria, despite his campaign promise to stay out of conflicts in the Middle East. While many in his conservative base were furious about the move, the bombing after a Syrian chemical weapons attack was widely applauded on the cable networks Trump voraciously consumes.

And it changed the subject from the investigations into Russian interference — and possible collaboration with his campaign — in the U.S. election.

Some things don't change. Bruce LeVell, a Georgia congressional candidate and Trump campaign backer who met with him several times this week, said, "We don't want his Twitter to go away. That's his pipeline to supporters, and he still has it."

N. Korean official blames Trump for region's 'vicious cycle'

PYONGYANG, North Korea (AP) — North Korea's vice foreign minister told The Associated Press on Friday that the situation on the Korean Peninsula is now in a "vicious cycle," and that Pyongyang won't "keep its arms crossed" in the face of a pre-emptive strike by U.S.

In an exclusive interview with the AP in Pyongyang on Friday, Vice Minister Han Song Ryol also blamed President Donald Trump for raising tensions, saying that his "aggressive" tweets were "making trouble."

Tensions are deepening as the U.S. has sent an aircraft carrier to waters off the peninsula and is conducting its biggest-ever joint military exercises with South Korea. Pyongyang, meanwhile, recently launched a ballistic missile and some experts say it could conduct another nuclear test at virtually anytime.

Trump added to the growing war of words with a tweet on Tuesday that said the North is "looking for trouble." He added that if China doesn't do its part to rein in Pyongyang's nuclear ambitions, the U.S. can handle it.

Many North Korea watchers believe North Korea could have a viable nuclear warhead and a



Han Song Ryol, North Korea's vice foreign minister, listens to a translator during an interview with The Associated Press on Friday in Pyongyang, North Korea. Han Song Ryol said the situation on the Korean Peninsula is now in a "vicious cycle."

AP Photo/Wong Maye-E

ballistic missile capable of hitting the United States' mainland on Trump's watch as president — within the next few years.

Outwardly, there are few signs of concern in North Korea despite the political back and forth. Instead, the country is gearing up for its biggest holiday of the year, the 105th anniversary of the birth of the late Kim Il Sung, the country's founder and leader Kim Jong Un's grandfather.

The Saturday anniversary may provide the world with a look at some of that arsenal. Expectations are high the North may put its newest

missiles on display during a military parade that could be held to mark the event.

At the same time, speculation is growing that Pyongyang may be close to conducting more nuclear or missile tests, despite a raft of international sanctions punishing it over its nuclear weapons program.

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe warned Thursday that North Korea may be capable of firing a missile loaded with sarin nerve gas toward Japan, as international concern mounted that a missile or nuclear test by the authoritarian state could be imminent.

BRIEFLY

Trump's health care fixes don't impress insurers

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Trump administration released limited fixes Thursday for shaky health insurance markets, but insurers quickly said those actions won't guarantee stability for millions of consumers now covered.

While calling it a step in the right direction, the industry is looking for a guarantee that the government will also keep paying billions in "cost-sharing" subsidies. And President Donald Trump says he hasn't made up his mind on that.

Republicans contend that the Affordable Care Act, or ACA, is beyond repair, but their "repeal and replace" slogan hasn't been easy to put into practice, or politically popular. So Thursday's action was intended to keep the existing system going even as Republicans pursue a total remake.

Dragged passenger lost 2 teeth and broke his nose

CHICAGO (AP) — The passenger dragged from a United flight lost two front teeth and suffered a broken nose and a concussion, his lawyer said Thursday, accusing the airline industry of having "bullied" its customers for far too long.

"Are we going to continue to be treated like cattle?" attorney Thomas Demetrio asked.

The passenger, Dr. David Dao, has been released from a hospital but will need reconstructive surgery, Demetrio said at a news conference, appearing alongside one of Dao's children. Dao was not there.

The 69-year-old physician from Elizabethtown, Kentucky, was removed by police from the United Express flight Sunday at Chicago's O'Hare Airport after refusing to give up his seat on the full plane to make room for four airline

employees. Cellphone video of him being pulled down the aisle on his back and footage of his bloody face have created a public-relations nightmare for United.

One of Dao's five children, Crystal Pepper, said the family was "horrified, shocked and sickened" by what happened. She said it was made worse by the fact that it was caught on video.

For Dao, who came to the U.S. after fleeing Vietnam by boat in 1975 when Saigon fell, being dragged off the plane "was more horrifying and harrowing than what he experienced in leaving Vietnam," Demetrio said.

Demetrio, who indicated Dao is going to sue, said the industry has long "bullied" passengers by overbooking flights and then bumping people, and "it took something like this to get a conversation going."

"I hope he becomes a poster child for all of us," the lawyer said.

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