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## How Can Foreign Policy Survive Trump? Look to the CIA

Matthew F. Ferraro

ON OCTOBER 4 | IN CIA, WAR OF IDEAS

What are the foreign policy consequences of what was once unthinkable: a Trump presidency? The recent tightening of the polls—Hillary Clinton’s [strong performance](#) in the first debate notwithstanding—dictates we think through how best to contain the damage to American long-term interests that will be wrought if Trump takes a seat behind the [Resolute desk](#).

Under such circumstances, for stability and continuity in national security, Americans should look to an unexpected place—into the shadows, to

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America's intelligence agencies.

Unbeknownst to many, CIA, NSA, and other agencies maintain remarkably stable associations with intelligence services around the globe. All sides benefit from these partnerships, which are known as “[liaison relationships](#).”

As Eric Rosenbach and Aki Peritz have [written](#), American agencies are larger and more powerful than their foreign peers, and they see events in a global context. Foreign spy agencies tend to be local, focused on specific regions or issues, possessed of greater cultural understandings, and able to gain access to information or places denied to American eyes.

The U.S. intelligence services have developed robust liaison relationships with close allies and multilateral groups, like the Commonwealth countries and NATO, and complex yet lasting relationships with countries that are not traditional allies, like [Pakistan's intelligence service](#).

Intelligence agencies work outside the limelight and are staffed and mostly led by career officers, not political appointees. Accordingly, liaison relationships are “remarkably durable, operating below the surface, even when political relations are stormy,” as former CIA Director Michael Hayden wrote in his [memoir](#). “That’s because they enable mutually valuable exchanges between professionals who face common problems, between intelligence establishments that will still be in business and will still be expected to perform when policies and political leaders change.”

These partnerships, sustained by overlapping interests, professional respect, and longevity, have a history of weathering rough patches—and they may well provide the ballast American national security and foreign policy will need in a topsy-turvy Trump administration.

Understanding Trump's putative national security policy is difficult because his proposals—as they exist—are incoherent, contradictory, or off-the-cuff. “Trump swings from isolationism to military adventurism within the space of one sentence,” one group of anti-Trump Republican foreign policy hands [wrote in March](#). His approach to coping with ISIS has ranged widely from

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leaving Syria and Russia to fight the Islamic State alone because “[t]hat’s not our fight” to bombing the region indiscriminately.

Furthermore, Trump has regularly denigrated NATO as “obsolete” and threatened not to honor America’s commitments to it. He has also threatened to withdraw U.S. protection from Japan and South Korea, spoken favorably of nuclear proliferation, and heaped praise on Vladimir Putin, bizarrely excusing (as recently as the Hofstra University debate) Moscow’s likely meddling in the U.S. presidential election itself.

Such “erratic behavior” has “alarmed our closest allies,” a group of fifty former Republican national security officials observed. One ambassador from an American ally told the *Washington Post* that he couldn’t “tell you how the unpredictability we are seeing [from Trump] scares us.” Trump’s “instinct is always to abandon friends and allies, to smash up alliances that have kept the peace, to leave the world to fend for itself against aggressors and predators,” wrote David Frum in *The Atlantic*.

Temperamentally, Trump fares no better. He consistently jumps to conclusions, entertains conspiracy theories, and wages verbal war against all perceived enemies—including staunch American allies like the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom and the Chancellor of Germany—with a fusillade of angry invective.

A 70-year-old man with an ego as immense as Trump’s will probably not change his approach to statesmanship once in office. Even if Trump’s most outlandish pronouncements fail to become policy, there is little doubt his ill-conceived rhetorical effusions will continue, roiling diplomatic waters.

Intelligence Community liaison relationships may help calm such angry seas. One can imagine a CIA Station Chief taking on the necessary task of soothing the jangled nerves of a liaison partner, explaining that President Trump’s most recent extreme and alienating rhetoric on a matter of joint concern really did not mark a shift in American policy.

Liaison relationships can not only provide succor to allies and continuity to national security, but they can also offer the opportunity for creative engagement. Freed from the traditional public scrutiny and the political influence of the Defense or State Departments, intelligence agencies can undertake innovative diplomatic projects.

Two examples from CIA lore illustrate the point. First, it was the legendary CIA covert operator and later Deputy Director [Stephen Kappes](#) who negotiated Muammar Gaddafi's renunciation of weapons of mass destruction in exchange for the restoration of diplomatic relations with Washington, reportedly without the State or Defense Departments knowing of the initiative. And it was CIA Middle East hand [Robert Ames](#) who opened a secret channel between the U.S. government and the Palestinian Liberation Organization in the late-1970s, laying the groundwork for the diplomacy that has since followed, when doing so was politically toxic for American diplomats.

The mix of continuity and initiative that characterizes the intelligence agencies' relationships with foreign partners may offer an invaluable contribution to peace and security during a Trump administration that could very well reflect the quixotic nature of the man himself.

It is hardly an ideal scenario, but working to advance U.S. interests in the face of difficult circumstances is what American intelligence officers do well every day.

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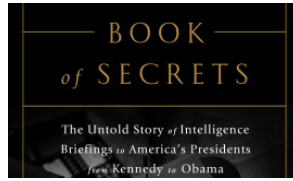
*Matthew F. Ferraro (@MatthewFFerraro) is an attorney and former intelligence officer.*

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