

IDEAS

Why Does Donald Trump Refuse to Defend America?


The president has long articulated a moral equivalence between the country's interests and those of dictatorships.

By Tom Nichols



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Some of Donald Trump's favorite world leaders have been scoundrels, bullies, and dictators. He keeps a picture of himself with the Russian autocrat Vladimir Putin on the wall of the White House. He claims to have fallen "in love" with the North Korean dictator Kim Jong Un. He publicly supported Hungary's Viktor Orbán, who has been chased from power, and Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro, who is now under house arrest for the next two decades. He just returned from China and gushed about how

the General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, Xi Jinping, is a “great leader” whom he’s honored to have as “a friend.”

The China summit also showed, yet again, that such men can both intimidate and flatter Trump into taking their side, even against the United States.

Trump’s own FBI calls China’s recent cyberattacks and influence operations against U.S. government agencies, businesses, and academic institutions “a grave threat to the economic well-being and democratic values of the United States.” But when asked whether he had discussed these attacks with Xi, the president not only waved the question away but seemed almost eager to absolve China as a nation no better or worse than America: “I did. And he talked about attacks that we did in China. You know, what they do, we do too. It’s, like, the spying; they’re talking about, *Oh, the spying*. I said, ‘Well, we do it too.’”

When pressed for a clarification, Trump went on: “I’m talking about spying. The question was asked of me yesterday, I guess, ‘What about the fact that China is spying in the United States?’ I said, ‘Well, it’s one of those things because we spy like hell on them too.’”

Trump was then asked about concerns that China was inserting code in crucial systems that control various parts of American infrastructure, such as energy, communications, and water. “You don’t know that,” he answered. “I’d like to see it, but it’s very possible that they do. And we’re doing things to them. I told them, ‘We do a lot of stuff to you that you don’t know about, and you are doing stuff to us that we probably do know about.’ We do plenty. It’s a double-edged sword.”

Instead of saying that these cyberattacks were real threats and that the country’s national-security professionals were working to stop them, the president of the United States gave an answer that just as easily could have come from a Chinese official: *Secret code in your power grid? You don’t know that. We’d like to see the proof. But you Americans do plenty of things to us that we probably don’t even know about.*

This would be less startling if Trump had always been soft on China, but for years, he has preened as a China hawk. During his first two presidential campaigns, he pounded China as an existential threat to the U.S. economy, a rogue power stealing America’s intellectual property and sending its graduate students to the United States to infiltrate our universities. “China’s theft of American technology, intellectual property, and research,” read a White House statement in 2020, “threatens the safety, security, and economy of the United States.”

Trump, after getting a private talking-to from Xi, now wants to know why any of this is a big deal. After all, *everyone does it*. (Perhaps I take this somewhat personally because I was a federal employee when China hacked the Office of Personnel Management in 2015, and all of my personal data, including my security-clearance forms, are now likely sitting in a computer in Beijing.)

This isn't the first time that Trump has cowered rather than admit a dictatorship is trying to harm the United States. Shortly after Trump took office in early 2017, the Fox News host Bill O'Reilly pressed the president about his professed respect for Putin. "He's a killer," O'Reilly protested. Trump nodded a bit and then said: "There's a lot of killers. We got a lot of killers. What, you think our country's so innocent?"

Trump would top this appalling moral equivalence a year later at a summit with Putin in Helsinki. A hangdog Trump stood next to Putin and affirmed that he, as the president of the United States, took the word of a Russian dictator over the conclusions presented to him by loyal Americans that Russia tried to meddle in the 2016 elections, a well-substantiated charge that Trump has always hated because it implies that he won the presidency only with foreign help. "I have great confidence in my intelligence people," he said, "but I will tell you that President Putin was extremely strong and powerful in his denial today."

Putin, for his part, smiled approvingly, and understandably so: Trump was singing lyrics Putin could easily have written. The American president made these remarks after meeting with the Russian president privately, a risky move that he repeated when he met with Xi privately in Beijing. (Aides can keep records, and even intervene if discussions go off the rails, which is why presidents and other top officials usually try to avoid meetings without them.) Likewise, when Putin came to Alaska at Trump's invitation last summer, the presidents again met privately, and Trump again emerged parroting the Russian leader's talking points.

This kind of behavior goes beyond mere apple-polishing. Almost any time Trump talks to a foreign strongman, he seems both charmed and intimidated, and ends up defending his autocratic friend rather than his country. These dictators appear to bring out a kind of neediness in Trump: In China, Xi took him on a tour of a private garden, and like a swooning teenager on a date in a nice restaurant, Trump asked whether the Chinese leader ever took other foreign guests to the same place.

The people around Trump support these equivocations because anyone who opposes Trump's ideas in the White House will be shown the door; any Republican who speaks up in Congress will be primaried out of their seat. Trump, in his second term, will not change. He will never take a robust stand against America's top-line enemies: He saves that kind of rancor for our allies. When he does take aim at hostile regimes, he chooses lesser powers such as Iran, whose leaders he does not know and whose military is no direct threat to the United States.

We do not know what Trump said to Xi behind closed doors. More important, we will likely never know what was said *to* him. But whatever it was, both Xi and Putin clearly know how to press the American president into taking their side, including making excuses for espionage against the United States and endangering American friends in Taiwan and Ukraine.

The president's supporters defend this sort of fawning over dictators from time to time, saying that Trump is just making deals and playing multidimensional chess. But nearly a decade of this kind of embarrassing behavior suggests that Trump's constant equivocations do not reflect strategy or realism. They are instead evidence of his lack of a moral compass—and his meekness in the presence of powerful autocrats.

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