

Analysis

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(Left) Picture taken on Feb 4, 2019 shows a blown-up ATM in a devastated bank branch in Langenhagen, eastern Germany. (Right) Picture taken on May 2, 2019 shows a blown-up ATM in an underground station in Berlin. —AFP

Trump's dance with autocrats keeps open diplomatic doors

For those who accuse US President Donald Trump of being more at home in the company of dictators, autocrats and authoritarian rulers than with democratic leaders, the past week has provided ready ammunition. As protesters took to the streets in Hong Kong calling for democracy and human rights, Trump's most successful meetings at the Group of 20 summit in Osaka last week appear to have been with leaders accused in the West of denying those liberties.

With Chinese President Xi Jinping, the focus was on easing the trade war between Beijing and Washington, while with Russian President Vladimir Putin, Trump joked of "getting rid" of troublesome journalists.

Trump is hardly the first US president to make polite small talk with autocrats although he does seem to seek out and enjoy such encounters more than any recent predecessor. That was evident with his historic few steps into North Korea on Sunday when he became the first sitting US president to visit the isolated state. North Korean President Kim Jong-un welcomed Trump's assertions of a personal connection between the two men, and agreement was reached on restarting stalled nuclear talks despite widespread skepticism in the US national security establishment. In many respects, what was most striking about Trump's activity in Osaka was how much of it will have been contrary to the advice of the US government apparatus, including his own political appointees. On a host of issues in recent weeks and months, the US president has shown a deep distrust of even many of his inner circle.

It's an approach that was also seen in the confrontation with Iran, when Trump appeared to shock many of even his closest advisers last month by stepping back from a military strike following the shooting down of a US drone. This pointed to a schism with National Security Advisor John Bolton and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. Both are hawkish figures who want a tougher line on Tehran and other perceived US foes. According to the Wall Street Journal, Trump complained that some of those around him were trying to push him into war with Iran, something he described as "disgusting". "We don't need any more wars," the newspaper quoted him as saying. This incident, the G20 meetings and the North Korea visit point to the same paradox of the Trump presidency. It is not just that Trump relishes ignoring advice and upending the expectations of those around him. It is that while he tends towards more aggressive, disruptive action than most of his advisers recommend, he is also more conciliatory. It's a dynamic that is easily interpreted simply as being unpredictable, but it does contain some logic. It also opens the door to diplomatic "off-ramps" at times when rising tensions have otherwise seemed unstoppable.

Amid all the criticism of Trump over North Korea, it's easy to forget that in his first year in office he was roundly blamed for talking up tensions. As Pyongyang tested ever more powerful rockets and warheads, the US president appeared to be doing everything in his power to suggest he was considering military action. Only an unexpected diplomatic breakthrough by South Korea at the 2018 Winter Olympics - which opened the door to the first Trump-Kim meeting - provided a reason to ease the tension. North Korea almost certainly will not give up its nuclear warheads, but that is not the outcome the United States is realistically seeking. What Washington most set its sights on was a halt to Pyongyang's trajectory towards having long-range rockets and warheads capable of hitting the continental United States - and the hiatus in testing such weapons since last year appears to have done just that, at least for now.

Rather than achieving some improbable disarmament deal, Trump's focus now appears to be on simply keeping dialogue going, ensuring Kim feels secure enough to avoid restarting those tests. It may not be a true long-term solution, but it has reduced the risk of war. Indications are growing that Trump wants a deal with China on the economy. As with North Korea - and indeed Iran - Trump created much of the current crisis with China himself, starting a trade war that few around him felt was wise.

But it may also be true that as with Iran, Trump is unhappy with the wider trend in Washington of simply seeing China as an enemy - a position increasingly common in the Pentagon. Having until now been more aggressive than the Washington consensus, Trump seems open to showing greater openness to China than many think wise - including easing restrictions on US firms trading with Chinese telecoms company Huawei, seen by many Western security experts as a major security risk.

In contrast to Barack Obama's presidential administration, Trump has little or no interest in allowing relationships to be defined by democracy or human rights. Pompeo had said Trump would specifically raise the issue of Hong Kong with China, but it appeared largely to be swept under the carpet. Khashoggi's killing also appears not to have been a huge irritant during talks with the Saudi crown prince. With Putin, Trump seemed envious of the Russian leader's level of domestic control.

That's unsettling on a number of levels. But it will make those countries less nervous of US interference and potential "regime change" - worries that have contributed to tensions over the past decade. Betting global peace on the outcome of Trump's moods and temperament might seem a risky bet but for now, that's what is happening. Last week - indeed, last month, over Iran's shooting down of a US drone - showed him in a conciliatory phase. —Reuters

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Germany is EU's Eldorado for ATM raiders

"Search for black Audi after attempt to blow up a cash machine", "Neighbors hear loud bang, perpetrators flee in Audi", "Car chase through three federal states": headlines like these have become commonplace around Germany as raids on cash machines have increased in number. Some 369 ATMs were destroyed by explosions last year, a 38-percent increase compared with 2017 and 10 times more than a decade ago, according to data from the Federal Criminal Police Office (BKA).

Most of the crimes follow the same pattern, with perpetrators using an electric detonator or fuse to set off a mixture of gases pumped into the machine - or more rarely a solid explosive. Carried out late at night, perpetrators often plan the attacks "months in advance", according to Europol. The crimes can be risky, with one man killed in Oct 2018 while attempting a similar attack on a ticket machine at a local train station in Halle, southwest of Berlin.

But successful attacks on ATMs are highly lucrative. In May, raiders who blasted open a Commerzbank cash machine in Eschborn, near Frankfurt, made off with €190,000 (\$215,000). The police managed to grab one suspect who returned to the scene of the crime in the small hours, but his accomplices and the cash have disappeared without trace, Frankfurt prosecutor Christian Hartwig said. Many cash

machine crackers come "from the Netherlands and central Europe" to Germany simply because of its favorable geography, he added.

'Audi gang'

Germany's geographical position at the centre of Europe and its dense web of motorways, much of which is not covered by a speed limit, means that criminals can more easily shake off police than elsewhere - driving German-made sports cars, naturally. One particularly notorious group has plagued the state of North Rhine-Westphalia, which shares a border with the Netherlands and where the largest number of bank raids are carried out.

The press dubbed the group the "Audi gang" because their getaway car of choice tended to be rented or stolen vehicles of that particular high-end brand. Three members of the gang were hauled before a court in state capital Duesseldorf in June, accused of stealing more than €600,000 and causing €100,000 of damage in 2017-18. Last year, a total of 128 suspects were arrested over cash machine robberies, most of them from the Netherlands, the BKA said.

Even so, Germany accounts for more than one-third of the attacks recorded across 11 large European countries sur-

veyed by the European Association for Secure Transactions (EAST). The nation's 58,000 machines make up just 16 percent of the installed base across all the countries in the study.

Fighting back

While cash machine attacks have mounted in Germany, the number reported in the other 10 nations studied by EAST, including France and Britain, fell 15 percent to just under 700 altogether. Such data highlight how banks can work together with government support to reduce the incentives to blast open ATMs. In the Netherlands, lenders created the "Geldmaat" network, agreeing to hold less cash in each machine but refill them more regularly in order to reduce the potential payoff for any one raid.

France ordered banks in 2015 to fit ATMs with systems that stain banknotes if they are forcibly removed. Europol credits the move with sharply reducing the number of attacks in France, which fell from 304 in 2013 to just 58 in 2018, according to National Gendarmerie figures. Even in Germany, criminals fail to secure any banknotes in 60 percent of cases thanks to well-protected machines, the BKA said. But successful attacks can be highly lucrative. On average, €130,000 are stolen in each German crime, compared with just €17,100 across the 11 countries surveyed by EAST. —Reuters

Under pressure from Trump, OPEC embraces Putin

When Vladimir Putin announced at the weekend that OPEC would extend oil production cuts, broadcasting a deal before the group had even met to approve it, the move angered some member nations. They were dismayed at the leading role non-OPEC Russia, once seen as the group's rival in oil markets, was playing in shaping the group's policies. But reality soon set in, and the acceptance that Moscow could help OPEC in its goal of propping up oil prices at a time when it is facing intensifying heat on another front: from US President Donald Trump.

Trump is putting unprecedented pressure on OPEC and its de facto leader Saudi Arabia, demanding they pump more crude to drive down fuel prices - a key domestic issue for him as he seeks re-election next year. Iranian Oil Minister Bijan Zanganeh initially expressed outrage about Russian President Putin's pre-announcement of the extended output cuts. "OPEC is going to die with these processes," he declared on Monday morning, before OPEC oil ministers met to effectively rubberstamp a done deal, bemoaning the Russia-Saudi dominance of the group's affairs. But by Monday evening, he had thrown his support behind the deal: "The meeting was good for Iran and we achieved what we wanted."

OPEC and Russia have become unlikely bedfellows, forging an "OPEC+" alliance to reduce global crude supply to counter soaring output from the United States and a weakening world econ-

omy. It is a marriage of convenience as both want higher oil prices to shore up their finances, while the alliance could also strengthen OPEC's position in the face of Trump's demands. "I don't think Russia is calling the shots," said Saudi Energy Minister Khalid Al-Falih when asked if Putin was now OPEC's boss. "I think Russia's influence is welcome."

Iran's veteran OPEC governor Hossein Kazempour Ardebili concurred, echoing his boss Zanganeh's conciliatory tone. "Russia is a big player. If it announced something in agreement with the rest of OPEC, this is most welcome," he said. "We are working together." Iraq, which has overtaken Iran as OPEC's second-largest producer after Saudi Arabia and has taken its market share in Europe and Asia, also said Moscow's rising role was positive.

Such a chorus of approval is a sharp reversal for relations between OPEC and Russia that have been characterized by antipathy and distrust for decades. Back in 2001, Russia agreed to cut production in tandem with OPEC but never delivered on its pledges and instead raised output. That severely damaged relations, and other attempts at cooperation were unsuccessful - until the recent alliance. In his book "Out of the Desert", former Saudi Oil Minister Ali Al-Naimi wrote that his 2014 meeting with Russian officials lasted just minutes. Upon learning Russia would not cut output, he gathered his papers and said: "I think the meeting is over."

Changing dynamics

Putin announced on Saturday that he had met Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman on the sidelines of a G20 meeting in Osaka and they had agreed to extend the OPEC+ production cuts. Gary Ross, chief executive of Black Gold Investors, said that even if it was "indelicat" for Saudi Arabia to let Putin announce the deal, it showed the changing oil market dynamics. "Trump has one interest

- low oil prices. Putin wants higher prices," said Ross, a veteran OPEC watcher. "Putin is vitally important for OPEC. And it is still in Russia's best interest to cooperate with OPEC as half its budget comes from energy revenues."

Russia needs prices of \$45-50 a barrel to balance its budget and its finances are stretched by U.S. sanctions imposed following its annexation of Crimea. Saudi Arabia needs an even higher price of \$80. Benchmark Brent crude is currently in the region of \$65 a barrel. But just as the collaboration could lend Saudi Arabia some support against Trump, who has demanded Riyadh increase oil supply if it wants U.S. military support in its standoff with regional rival Iran, it also gives Putin more than extra revenues.

Good relations with Riyadh, an American ally, bolsters Moscow's clout in the Middle East, helps Putin's campaign in Syria and might even help mend relations with Washington, according to two sources in Russia's delegation to Vienna, where OPEC officials have been meeting. Highlighting those intersecting roles, Russian Energy Minister Alexander Novak also serves as head of several Russian government commissions on trade and cooperation including with Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey and Qatar.

Iran's change in tone, in particular, illustrates the conflicting political and economic pressures it faces. Tehran's falling production, due to US sanctions reimposed and extended by Trump, has reduced its role within OPEC while increasing those of Saudi Arabia and non-OPEC Russia. Iran's exports plummeted to 0.3 million barrels per day in June from as much as 2.5 million bpd in April 2018. But Iran is itself also looking to help from Russia, one of just a few countries that has offered to aid Tehran to counter the sanctions choking its oil trade and hammering its economy. Two Russian energy industry sources said some work was being done to boost the Iranian economy but talks were slow and difficult, without giving details of the nature of the plans. —Reuters

Japan whale restaurants cheer hunt resumption

"Two sashimis, three steaks," cries the waitress at one of Tokyo's most famous whale restaurants during a frantic lunchtime service where Japan's resumption of commercial whaling has cooked up new hope. Mitsuo Tani has spent 46 of his 64 years preparing and cooking whale meat and hosts a mixed clientele at his restaurant: Salarymen in white shirts gulping down a quick lunch before heading back to the office, single women, retired couples.

Whale steak is the most popular dish at 980 yen (\$9). A thin rectangular piece of meat with as much rice, miso soup, vegetables and iced tea as the customer can eat. Also flying out of the kitchen is whale sashimi - raw slices of whale flesh, skin or liver. Japan's resumption of commercial whaling has prompted fury from other countries and campaigners, with activists saying that one of the three species targeted is threatened with extinction and sub-populations of the other two are depleted.

But veteran whale chef Tani is keen to promote the health benefits of whale meat. "It is five times lower in calories than beef, 10 times lower in cholesterol, two times less fat than chicken. It's packed with iron. But abroad, people do not know this," he told AFP. Not all would agree with Tani's health based sales-pitch, however. In 2015, when the Environmental Investigation Agency tested the mercury levels of whale meat sold in Japan, they found it riddled with the substance. Whipping up a "whale roast beef" at the pass, Tani explained that he had to move from the northern city of Sendai after the 2011 tsunami and the price of whale meat soared amid a significant drop in supply. In Tokyo, he has never had any problem procuring meat. While Japan was still part of the International Whaling Commission, the whales caught in Antarctic waters for "research" purposes still ended up as sashimi and steak on plates around the country.

Ironically, with Japan leaving the IWC and resuming commercial whaling off its own coast, the quantity of meat may decline. Japan set an annual quota of more than 600 whales while in the IWC. The cap now stands at 227 until the end of the year - 52 minke, 150 Bryde's and 25 sei whales. It is not the only country carrying out hunts, with Norway and Iceland conducting them in recent years and indigenous people from Alaska to Greenland allowed exemptions to the moratorium. Hitting back at those who fear the resumption of commercial whaling further endangers whales, Japanese authorities say the quotas have been set carefully "to keep the whale population at a sustain-



This July 2, 2019 picture shows a chef holding a whale meat at a restaurant in Tokyo. —AFP

able level". "I'm scared that the quantity of whale meat will go down," admitted Tani.

'Well cooked'

Another whale restaurant boss, Sumiko Koizumi, hailed the resumption of whaling as "an excellent thing" and said it was down to chefs to promote the meat and dream up new recipes. Removing the stigma around whale meat will make it easier for consumers, she said, "first because supermarkets will be more inclined to offer it and wholesalers will listen more to our needs and be in a position to meet them".

Kenta Yodono, sales manager at the Kyodo whaling firm that operates Japan's flagship whaling boat, said the commercial hunts would catch different species of whales, which would taste slightly different. "The commercial species will be different and certain people might be concerned that they will not have the same taste. But in general, I think the quality will improve and we can respond to restaurants' needs," Yodono told AFP.

He acknowledged activists' concerns over the cruelty of the whale hunt and said "the fishermen are conscious of the fact that the time the animal suffers should be reduced". Tani does have some fears however over the immediate future of his industry, with few chefs training to acquire the specialized cooking skills required. "With commercial whaling halted for more than 30 years, no one has got into the business and that will not happen overnight," he said.

"Even if some people get into it now, it will take 30 years. And if they find the work too hard, they will stop. Whale needs to be well cooked otherwise no one will start to eat it again," added Tani. Japan has defended the controversial whale hunt as a key part of its tradition and rich culinary heritage. And Tani agreed. "A country that does not preserve its food culture has no future." —AFP

Is July 7 vote last stand for Tsipras?

Greeks vote on Sunday in a general election that is the first in the country's post-ballot era, which looks set to oust leftist Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras after a record-setting four years in power. Greece's first avowed atheist and longest-serving crisis premier, as well as the youngest in over a century, Tsipras is battling to overcome a 10-point deficit in opinion polls, mainly caused by widespread dissatisfaction with his government's tax policies. Tsipras's Syriza party "broke a number of promises and dashed hopes among party voters. They were forced to follow a policy of austerity" that badly hit the middle class, says political analyst George Flessas. Tsipras stormed to power in 2015 with promises to eliminate austerity. Instead, Greece's creditors forced him to accept a third bailout following a disastrous six-month negotiation that nearly saw the country pushed out of the euro.

Now, the 44-year-old vows to make "the biggest comeback in modern Greek history", despite suffering successive defeats to conservative challenger Kyriakos Mitsotakis in the last two months. In campaign speeches, Tsipras has accused Mitsotakis - who was part of a 2012-2014 crisis government - of "disastrous" mismanagement that brought hundreds of thousands of job losses and business failures. Tsipras has touted his Syriza party's track record in reducing unemployment by around eight points and raising the minimum wage for the first time since 2012. His government also rolled out a batch of last-minute tax cuts in May.

But the majority of the electorate seem unmoved. "In 2015, Syriza represented hope and political renewal. Now it's a party like any other," says Andreas Tsanavaris, a former party activist. Christos Maravelis, who voted for the once-radical leftists in 2015, says many will be seeking to "punish Syriza for betraying the Greek people" with false promises. Tsipras himself in June called for the snap election after a stinging defeat to Mitsotakis' New Democracy party, which secured a margin of nearly 9.5 points in May's European Parliament elections. New Democracy later carried off the bulk of the country's regions in local elections a few days later.

Mitsotakis is a hard-nosed reformer and political dynasty scion. He is the son of former prime minister Constantine Mitsotakis, one of the country's longest-serving parliamentarians. His sister, Dora Bakoyannis, is a former minister and Athens' first female mayor. And new Athens mayor Costas Bakoyannis, elected in May, is his nephew. His election as prime minister would mark the return of family politics to Greek government, says Tsipras, whose modest background interrupted this long-running political tradition. —AFP