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Going around Trump, Governors Embark on Their Own Diplomatic Missions

By ALEXANDER BURNSJULY



Prime Minister Justin Trudeau of Canada, left, and Gov. Terry McAuliffe of Virginia on Friday at the National Governors Association meeting in Providence, R.I.

PROVIDENCE, R.I. — Gov. Jay Inslee of Washington, a Democrat, huddled with the leaders of Mexico and Canada in the space of 48 hours this spring, racing to Mexico City from Seattle for back-to-back discussions on climate change and trade.

Gov. Asa Hutchinson of Arkansas, a Republican, toured Europe last month to deliver what he called a “reassuring” message to business leaders, declaring that Americans would not “retreat” from international commerce.

And Gov. Pete Ricketts, Republican of Nebraska, recently announced he would visit Canada this summer with a message of thanks — for the North American Free Trade Agreement, a pact that President Trump has harshly criticized and says he intends to renegotiate.

In ordinary times, most American governors tend to avoid international exploits, boasting of their consuming interest in balancing budgets and operating the machinery of state government. When they venture abroad, it is mainly to hawk products manufactured in their states.

But under the Trump administration, that has begun to change: Leadership at the state level has taken on an increasingly global dimension, as governors assert themselves in areas where they view Mr. Trump as abandoning the typical priorities of the federal government. They have forged partnerships across state and party lines to offset Trump administration policies they see as harmful to their constituencies.

Unsettled by the president's skepticism of foreign trade, governors have made newly pointed appeals to international businesses and consumers, at times gently rebuking the White House for presenting an inhospitable face to the world.

After Mr. Trump rejected the Paris climate agreement, a dozen governors announced a state-level coalition to carry out the pact in a partial form, with Gov. Jerry Brown of California, a Democrat, taking a leading role and traveling to China for a meeting on climate with President Xi Jinping.

Mr. Hutchinson, who did not join the climate alliance, said Mr. Trump's posture on trade had worried traditional United States partners. He credited the president with having "strengthened our negotiating position," but said gestures of comity were also important.

"I do take advantage of the opportunity to reassure the European audiences, but also the Asian audiences, that global trade cannot be diminished," Mr. Hutchinson said. "It's part of the fabric of our global commerce, and I want to continue to be a voice for it."

The turning outward of American governors was on prominent display at the National Governors Association retreat in Providence, R.I., last week. There, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau of Canada spoke on Friday, the first foreign leader to address the group. Gov. Terry McAuliffe of Virginia, a Democrat who is chairman of the governors association, said representatives were present from a number of other countries, including China, Japan, Mexico and Vietnam.

In addition, aides to a number of governors, including Mr. Brown and Mr. Inslee, conferred privately to plan for a climate conference in Bonn, Germany. Mr. Trudeau framed his remarks to the group as a tribute to the relationship between the United States and Canada, highlighting shared goals on climate and national security, and urging governors not to support a "race to the bottom" in the form of trade protectionism. Using the same favorable adjectives most American governors apply to themselves, Mr. Trudeau hailed them for pursuing economic prosperity with a "pragmatic approach that crosses party lines."

"Whether Republican or Democrat, in this economy, that's likely your very first priority," he said. "Guess what: It's my first priority as well."

The Canadian leader's friendship mission followed months of stepped-up contact between American governors and Canadian political and business leaders after Mr. Trump's election.

Gov. Phil Scott of Vermont, who has made multiple trips across the Canadian border since his election in November, said he had made it a priority to put the state's longstanding economic partner at ease.

Mr. Scott, who is one of two Republican governors to join the climate initiative, along with Charlie Baker of Massachusetts, said that in Canada there had been a mood of "concern, especially initially, about this new administration."

"They needed some reassurance that we were there fighting on their behalf, and on our behalf as well," Mr. Scott said. "We wanted to make sure that we communicated that and gave them, the Canadians, reassurance that we're there for them."

Mr. McAuliffe said he had recently returned from a seven-country swing through Europe, where at every turn leaders battered him with questions about Mr. Trump's policies on trade and immigration.

Gov. Asa Hutchinson of Arkansas during an interview on Thursday at the governors' meeting in Providence. Credit Stephan Savoia/Associated Press

"What I try to tell everybody is, 'Forget the federal government. Come directly to the states,'" Mr. McAuliffe said, adding that in meetings abroad, "I've got to spend the first 30 minutes defending America: 'No, we're all about business. No, we want to trade with you.'"

The reassurance campaign has worked both ways: With an eye toward the Nafta talks, both Mr. Trudeau and Mayor Miguel Ángel Mancera of Mexico City, who heads a coalition of governors from Mexico, peppered state leaders in Providence with information about the value of trade in their states.

But American governors have appeared to need little convincing, and Democrats and Republicans said in interviews that they had already been intensifying **their international outreach to mitigate what they view as retrenchment in Washington.**

Gov. Kate Brown of Oregon, a Democrat, said Mr. Trump's policies on trade and climate had jeopardized the interests of her state, which is heavily invested in exporting electronics and agricultural goods to Canada and East Asia. "There is a sense of urgency for me, in terms of Oregon's economy," she said.

Ms. Brown said she plans to attend the November climate summit meeting in Germany, after attending a meeting last month — convened in California **by Mr. Brown** — with the prime minister of Fiji, Frank Bainimarama, who is a key United Nations climate official.

“It gives citizens across the globe hope that we can bring America — or bring Americans — in, and we can reach the goals of the Paris accord,” she said.

Republican governors, mostly supportive of Mr. Trump, also acknowledge that they are working around the president’s nationalistic stance. While Mr. Trump’s protectionist rhetoric helped propel him to victory in the election, foreign trade is an economic cornerstone of much of red-state America, including deeply conservative rural areas that depend on exporting agricultural goods.

Mr. Trump’s determination to overhaul Nafta and his rejection of the Trans-Pacific Partnership, a regional deal negotiated by the Obama administration, have rattled governors of both major parties in states that rely on commerce with Canada and Mexico, and across Asia.

Vice President Mike Pence, who also appeared at the governors conference and tends to speak about policy in more cautious terms than Mr. Trump, assured state leaders that while the administration wanted trade to be “both free and fair,” it was sensitive to the value of Nafta. The goal, he said, was for the pact to become “a win-win-win for all of our trading partners.”

But the governors’ unease around trade extends well beyond the Farm Belt, and transcends Mr. Trump’s criticism of specific accords. Their fear is that a swerve toward protectionism, coupled with Mr. Trump’s severe personal unpopularity in other countries, could make the United States a less appealing place for business over all.

A survey published in June by the Pew Research Center found sharp disapproval of Mr. Trump and his economic and environmental policies around the globe. Across the 37 countries tested, more than seven in 10 respondents disapproved of Mr. Trump’s rejection of international agreements on trade and climate, and of his proposal to build a wall on the border between the United States and Mexico.

If anxiety about the president’s approach afflicts governors of both parties, Democrats are far more eager to brand Mr. Trump a failed leader: Mr. Inslee said he viewed governors’ actions on climate and trade as compensating for a “giant sucking sound of ignorance” at the federal level.

“We think that this is a huge opportunity for the states,” Mr. Inslee said, “to fill the vacuum that has been created by the total absence of leadership coming out of the White House.”

It is not unheard-of for American governors to stake out activist stances on international policy, or to pressure the federal government from abroad to adjust its policies. For years, a succession of governors visited Cuba on a series of trade missions, many of them urging an easing of the United States economic embargo against the Castro regime.

And many governors have continued to take a more conventional approach to foreign travel, promoting their states as destinations for business without offering any particular commentary on the White House.

Yet even ostensibly standard trade missions have taken on a weightier character in a moment of such widespread uncertainty about Mr. Trump's policies.

Mr. Ricketts acknowledged that Mr. Trump's suspicion of international arrangements was a new kind of challenge for his state, Nebraska. While Mr. Ricketts emphasized that he was open to the president's approach, he said he hoped the White House would preserve existing economic bonds that favor his state, which each year sends more than \$1 billion in goods to both Canada and Mexico.

The purpose of his coming excursion to the North, he said, was to say "thank you to one of our