

Trump fracas eight days a week

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The last thing Donald Trump needed ahead of the crucial first overseas trip of his presidency was the sense of crisis enveloping Washington over his credibility and that of key members of his administration. But that is what he has got and it is imperative he uses the time before his departure overseas to sort out what even dispassionate US media outlets are presenting as a “ham-fisted” mess that poses a serious potential threat to the President. As The Wall Street Journal says, “Presidencies can withstand only so much turbulence before they come apart.”

There is much riding on Trump’s nine-day, five-stop, four-nation trip for the US and its allies. He goes first to Saudi Arabia to meet Muslim allies from across the Arab world in a bid to create a major new resolve against Islamic terrorism. Then he travels to Israel to underwrite US backing for the Jewish state and meet Palestinian leaders in the hope of restarting peace talks. After visiting the Pope in Rome, he will meet NATO leaders in Brussels, to reassure them of US support, before attending a G7 summit in Sicily.

The trip has been choreographed as Mr Trump’s presidential entree to the international stage as leader of the free world. For it to be successful, however, he is going to have to overcome the impact of the tumult in Washington. Even close allies such as Israel are said to be concerned about intelligence sharing with the US in the wake of the Russian controversy — although it must be said their public comments are steadfast. We noted yesterday that, as President, Mr Trump has the authority to pass on any classified information he deems valid but his judgment will always be open to question and he has to deal with malicious internal leaks. The furore came just the day after he fired FBI director James Comey, allegedly over the agency’s investigation of Russian dirty tricks.

Potentially more challenging to Mr Trump’s credibility are details emerging of his meeting with Mr Comey in February when he is said to have asked the FBI director to “let this go” while referring to the FBI’s investigation of ousted national security adviser Michael Flynn’s Russian connections. While the issue of shared intelligence, by its very nature, will always be shrouded in considerations of confidentiality and judgment, the allegation of a request for Mr Comey to drop an investigation before he was fired demands transparency. Nothing less will assist the credibility of the Trump White House. Mr Comey, indeed, owes it to his own reputation and the FBI’s to produce the notes he made of his conversations with Mr Trump.

The almost daily rollout of disclosures suggesting turmoil in the White House — doubtless helped along by Mr Trump’s unwise antagonism towards the intelligence agencies — is doing him harm. The dreaded word impeachment is being used by some congressmen. That seems unlikely. But if Mr Trump is to provide the leadership on the world stage that is desperately needed, he must get his house in order.

He is said to be considering a White House shake-up. But the reality is that US administrations invariably reflect the president’s own style and character. So unless Mr Trump is prepared to use more discipline himself that is unlikely to help. Credibility is the

key to getting his presidency back on track and overriding his vociferous critics. The sooner he realises this, the better.