



PERSPECTIVES

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President Trump: Formulating Strategy As He Goes Along

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Winds of war are blowing in the international arena, and the rhetoric of threats is intensifying. Notwithstanding the claims of critics and opponents of Trump, he has begun to formulate a strategy while responding to threats and crises in Syria and North Korea. The sides are now treading at the edge of the abyss. This approach could achieve effective deterrent results, but also entails considerable risks. Trump has decided to fight the forces of violence and terror in the world, joining forces with allies and using a variety of military and diplomatic measures. If his strategy succeeds, it could stabilize the world order and improve Israel's strategic position.

The winds of war are beginning to swirl around the world. A check of Google reveals a considerable spike in searches for the term "Third World War." Crises are besetting the difficult, conflict-ridden regions of the world and complicating relations between the world powers. Those crises have been precipitated by uses and demonstrations of force, including Assad's chemical-weapons attack on citizens of his country; a retaliatory US strike on the base from which Assad's planes took off for that attack; a US strike with a particularly deadly bomb on an ISIS stronghold in Afghanistan; threats and warnings of forceful responses by all sides; a military parade, ballistic-missile test, and preparations for a large nuclear test by North Korea, along with maneuvers and the dispatch of large naval forces to the area by the US; consultations and diplomatic meetings at senior levels, particularly in Washington and Moscow; and verbal sparring in the Security Council, along with psychological warfare.

It was clear that hostile countries would soon try to test Donald Trump, a president lacking political and international experience who had made many blunt warnings, some of them contradictory, about his foreign and defense policy. His emphasis on "America First" seemed to suggest that he would take the US into some form of isolationism, leading adversaries to infer that they could push the envelope. But Trump's reactions, including two surprise military strikes, have turned the tables.

In the crises involving Iran, Syria, and North Korea, the administration has explicitly warned its adversaries: "Don't test us." Vice President Mike Pence, who visited South Korea a few days ago, counseled North Korea "not to test [Trump's] resolve" and added that "all options are on the table," including the use of military force, to ensure that North Korea cannot launch nuclear-tipped missiles at the US. Although Obama, too, often declared that "all options are on the table," America's enemies did not believe him. In the wake of Trump's strikes in Syria and Afghanistan and dispatch of large forces to Korea, the use of that phrase by him and by others in his administration sounds much more credible.

Iran was the first to test Trump's mettle. It conducted a ballistic missile test a few days after he entered the White House, violating Security Council Resolution 2231 of July 2015, which endorsed the nuclear agreement with Tehran. Trump responded with warnings and with new sanctions on Iranian senior officials involved in developing the missiles and in terror. Assad was also testing Trump with the chemical attack in the Idlib area. He might have thought that Trump, like Obama, would do nothing. North Korea, too, posed a challenge to Trump when it tested ballistic missiles and prepared to test more destructive nuclear bombs.

Trump's critics claim he has no strategy and that his actions are arbitrary and incoherent. They have dubbed his policy one of "no strategy." Indeed, Trump and his senior officials have made contradictory statements. For example, before Assad's chemical weapons attack, White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer said that "with respect to Assad, there is a political reality that we have to accept." He added that "the United States has profound priorities in Syria and Iraq, and we've made it clear that counterterrorism, particularly the defeat of ISIS, is foremost among those priorities". After the attack, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson declared that there was no change in the orders of priority of the US.

Yet Nikki Haley, US ambassador to the UN, asserted that there had, in fact, been a change, and that the US wanted a new regime in Syria. Trump spoke of understandings and cooperation with Russia, yet entered into a fierce dispute

with Putin over Assad's behavior. Trump had also characterized China as an adversary during the campaign, but now regards it as a partner in reining in North Korea.

Trump's opponents have responded by ascribing his moves to extraneous motives, such as his desire to throw off the investigations of his associates' ties with Russia, to distract from his failure to get Congress to revoke Obamacare, or to paper over his alleged lack of achievements as his one hundredth day in office approaches. But when the adversaries of the US challenge it, evasion of the challenge exacts a high price. Trump's policy of swift and striking response thus reflects foreign and domestic considerations, not only personal interests.

Opponents also protested that before using force, Trump should have consulted with Congress. They pointed to Obama's conduct during the crisis over Assad's 2013 use of chemical weapons, when Obama planned retaliatory strikes but put the decision in Congress's hands. There are, however, two problems with that contention. First, the War Powers Resolution of 1973 allows a president to use force without congressional approval for 60 days, and he has another 30 days to withdraw forces. He need only inform Congress of the use of force within 48 hours. Trump acted exactly in accordance with this law. Second, in 2013, when Obama transferred the decision to Congress, he was not seeking approval to attack Assad but the opposite. His object was to avoid an operation, as quickly became clear.

The facts on the ground indicate at least the beginnings of strategic thought. What mainly emerges is a return to the position of leadership and involvement that Obama had renounced. Trump defines interests and uses various means to realize them. The chatter about whether or not Trump has a strategy displays widespread confusion about goals and means.

The goals are: destroying ISIS and Islamic terror, ending the war in Syria, reining in North Korea's nuclear program, and stopping Iran. The means Trump is employing include military operations, threats and warnings, diplomacy, and psychological warfare. To achieve an optimal effect, he is using a combination of these tools.

In Syria, Trump declared that ISIS had to be destroyed first, and then the civil war could be dealt with. After the chemical attack, he adopted a new, two-pronged strategy: a simultaneous struggle against ISIS and the Assad regime. This strategy was evident in the strikes on Assad's army and on ISIS fighters in Afghanistan.

The strategy that is emerging is aimed at deterring enemies and encouraging

cooperation among the world powers. Trump is pressuring Russia to keep Assad in check, and China to keep North Korea in check. Trump invited Chinese president Xi Jinping to meet with him at his private estate in Florida, and later spoke with him by telephone. He asked him to curb North Korea's nuclear program but warned that, if nothing was done, the US would act on its own. Tillerson met in Moscow with his Russian counterpart, Sergey Lavrov, and with Putin. He both expressed and received a good deal of criticism. Trump also met with NATO secretary Jens Stoltenberg, and, notwithstanding his own past statements, emphasized NATO's importance. Presumably, the world powers now understand each other better.

American military operations and measures do not stand by themselves. They were planned with great precision, almost certainly well before they were executed. Apart from the damage they inflicted, they conveyed messages. The retaliation against Assad's chemical attack conveyed messages to Assad himself, to Russia, and to the states that are developing weapons of mass destruction. The message to Assad is that he has to stop his attacks on civilians; the message to Russia is that it cannot do as it pleases in Syria; and the message to states like Iran and North Korea is that the US is prepared to use force to prevent the development and use of nuclear weapons.

The choice of the largest nonnuclear bomb in the American arsenal (the MOAB, or Massive Ordnance Air Blast), which had never before been used operationally, to strike an ISIS stronghold was part and parcel of psychological and communications warfare. It was meant to reinforce the message of American resolve to act against provocative enemies, even with very powerful weapons. The same pertains to the sending of large naval forces, including destroyers carrying Tomahawk missiles like those used against Syria, to the Korean theater, accompanied by warnings that if North Korea keeps developing nuclear weapons and intercontinental missiles to deliver them, and China's efforts do not bear fruit, the US will respond with a preemptive strike. Last week's revelations of a test by the US of a nuclear-type bomb was a further signal to North Korea's unstable leader Kim Jong-Un. These moves have transmitted unmistakable messages.

It may be hard to put confidence in the erratic and inexperienced Trump. But his lineup includes three generals of great talent and military experience: Defense Secretary James Mattis, National Security Adviser Herbert McMaster, and Homeland Security Secretary John Kelly. All three have held senior command positions in all the arenas where the US has fought in recent decades. Mattis and McMaster verge on being military geniuses. Their fingerprints can be seen in the choice of limited means to attack Assad's army and ISIS. These men, who know what war is and what price it can exact, will not allow Trump

to conduct an adventurous military policy. History, however, including that of the Arab-Israeli conflict, is replete with wars that no one wanted and that erupted nonetheless.

The US and its adversaries are at the edge of the abyss. It will require great skill in crisis and risk management, as well as a large degree of rational decision-making, to avoid sliding into it. The potential for deterrence and cooperation among the world powers is still greater than that of the eruption of a Third World War.

President Trump has decided to confront the forces of violence, terror, and disorder in the world while working together with allies and using various military and diplomatic means. Persistent yet flexible implementation of a coherent strategy could stabilize the world order and improve Israel's strategic position.

This article is based on articles the author published in *Israel Hayom* on April 7 and in *YNET* and *Globes* on April 18, 2017.

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