



PERSPECTIVES

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Donald Trump's National Security Doctrine

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: In light of the dramatic announcement by US President Donald Trump that the US will withdraw from the nuclear agreement with Iran (the JCPOA) and restore harsh economic sanctions, it is worthwhile to analyze the Trump administration's national security doctrine. The mainstream media's claims that Trump has no real strategy, that he does not understand the issues at stake and changes his mind about them constantly, and that the White House is in a state of confused turmoil do not stand up to scrutiny.

Outlines of the "Trump Doctrine"

President Donald Trump's decision to withdraw from the nuclear agreement with Iran (the JCPOA), and to renew harsh economic sanctions in order to force Tehran to accept significant changes to the deal, exemplifies Trump's inclination to carve out new patterns of diplomatic achievement. His ability to do this has been facilitated by the stabilization of his administration in the domestic arena.

In an albeit unique way, Trump and his administration operate in a rational, orderly, and calculated manner, notwithstanding the stigma that has adhered to them because of the president's extrovert nature and unorthodox language. The "Trump Doctrine" consists of commitments to preserve American interests, keep election promises to the voters, and implement policy.

According to this doctrine, America should, wherever possible, avoid direct long-term commitment of troops to conflicts abroad while at the same time maintaining the military capabilities for rapid intervention if required. These forces serve primarily to deter. Should they need to intervene, the object is to achieve a quick result through a concentration of forces and the use of

innovative fighting technologies – and then to cut off contact as soon as possible and return to the rear bases.

In this way, the administration is succeeding in bringing the American giant back to the forefront of the international arena (particularly in Asia and the Middle East) after the retreat that occurred under Trump's predecessor, Barack Obama. Trump is accomplishing this without entering into unreasonable commitments, and without forcing American taxpayers to pay huge sums to finance the ongoing expenses of the American Expeditionary Force.

Obama's legacy

The foreign policy of the eight-year Obama administration was and remains highly controversial. Having stirred worldwide euphoria upon his first election (he even received the Nobel Peace Prize before being able to do anything), Obama left his successor a disastrous international legacy. He miserably failed to deal with the "Arab Spring," made critical mistakes vis-à-vis the region's numerous conflicts (notably the Syrian civil war), and undermined the balance of power among the superpowers (China, Russia and the US). This led, on the one hand, to Beijing's first military engagement in the Middle East, and on the other, to renewed Russian engagement – for the first time since the Cold War – in both the Middle East and other regions of the world (Eastern Europe, Antarctica, North Africa). The Obama administration cut the budget of the US Army and the NASA program, inhibiting technological and scientific development.

All told, Obama's policies damaged the American image both internally and externally. In addition, the administration allowed nuclear threshold states, such as North Korea and Iran, to become militarily powerful, to threaten their neighbors, and to tread the nuclear path. This was all undertaken by Obama at the expense of Washington's closest allies (Japan, South Korea, Israel, and Saudi Arabia), which were perceived by the administration as obstacles rather than assets. At home, Obama ramped up a socialist tone with regard to the economy and society, leaving deep rifts in the culture and contributing to a decline in citizens' economic position.

The internal legitimacy of the Trump administration

American foreign policy and its ability to influence world powers, regional powers, and regional actors depends, first and foremost, on the ability of the administration to function internally. More than a year into Trump's term, the relationship between the president and the US Senate appears to have normalized. Trump has support, if limited, among conservative circles in the Democratic Party as well as traditional Republican elites that were hostile to

him after the election. This has enabled him to secure the necessary majority to get his tax reform agenda through the Senate, to make progress on the new immigration law, to overcome budget crises, and to stand firm in the face of domestic tensions. When the Trump administration came out with the upper hand on these issues, it was credited with achievements in domestic policy. This in turn strengthened its international standing, enabling it to begin to act more decisively in that arena.

A step-by-step rollback

Obama left a legacy of reduced American influence in the international arena, but the Trump administration is gradually managing to reverse that trend. The administration has taken action and continues to act to execute the foreign policy goals defined by Trump during his presidential campaign. The central goals were:

1. the defeat and eradication of ISIS
2. the recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital and the transfer of the US embassy to that location
3. the prevention of nuclear proliferation by North Korea and Iran

While Trump propounds a neo-separatist foreign policy of refraining from direct involvement in conflicts away from home, he has not been deterred from defending international norms and rules, such as the use of unconventional weapons. In April 2017, the US responded to the use by the Assad regime of chemical weapons against Syrian civilians by firing Tomahawk missiles into Syria. This move, which was limited in scope, was the opening shot in the US's return to a leadership position in the international arena.

Trump is not only fulfilling campaign promises but is acting with determination to implement his foreign policy – the “Trump Doctrine” – according to detailed and rational planning.

If we examine the administration's handling of the North Korean nuclear crisis, it appears that Trump acted deliberately in order to escalate the crisis, create a remote threat, and deter Pyongyang. The "war of words" between the leaders of the two countries, which included a threat by Trump that North Korea would be destroyed, was accompanied by rapid preparations for a decisive military strike. Economic sanctions were also imposed on the closed country, with the help of Russia and especially China, whose president, Xi Jinping, became Trump's main partner in the move.

It seems that Trump's strategy worked. Kim Jong-un was forced to normalize relations with South Korea and will meet with Trump in the near future. This

suggests that despite its militant statements, North Korea has come to terms with the new rules of the game, which include the possibility of an American military response coupled with massive economic pressure. Pyongyang may still be determined to complete its nuclear program, but the Trump administration's aggressive response has forced it to reevaluate how it should conduct that policy. Though the extent is not yet fully known, Washington has succeeded in restraining North Korea.

The relative success of the North Korean issue has boosted Trump's confidence and that of his administration, which in turn has helped establish its legitimacy.

In the Syrian case, an international coalition, with the participation of Britain and France, has been assembled to oppose the use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime. A limited retaliatory strike in April (slightly broader than the one a year ago) included a prominent civilian-military target in the heart of Damascus, showing that the Russians and the Syrians have no ability to prevent attacks of this kind. The Western action was proportionate to the goals set by the Trump administration with regard to the Syrian arena, which focus on the elimination of ISIS and the prevention of Iran's entrenchment in the Syrian-Israeli border region.

The Syrian action by the Western coalition does not point, as has been suggested, to the absence of an American strategy of intervention in Syria (or of Israel's abandonment of the Iranian threat for that matter). It is possible that Trump's administration will focus political and military solutions on Iran itself, which would explain a) the limited response to the Syrian regime's chemical attack and b) why Trump did not specify which forces are supposed to leave Syria (air, ground, or other). It is not inconceivable that Trump might choose other alternatives with which to restrict Iranian entrenchment in Syria.

In accordance with the Trump Doctrine, it is possible that if the situation vis-à-vis Iran deteriorates into open threats of war, Israel will be asked to allow the US army to operate from its territory against Iran.

Trump's decision to withdraw from the JCPOA suggests that the two countries are on the brink of direct confrontation, and hostile declarations are increasing between Washington and Tehran. As in the case of North Korea, Trump seems to have adopted a strategy of escalation against Iran to force it to agree to significant changes in the agreement. It is possible that America's enhanced credibility and empowerment, made possible to a great extent by the Trump administration's recent achievements in the international arena, will help it to persuade Moscow (which Trump is not afraid to confront) and the Europeans that object to changes to the agreement that changes are in fact necessary.

If the US succeeds with Iran, it would further validate the Trump administration in the international arena, which could in turn enable it to move forward on the Palestinian issue. In contrast to the policy of previous US administrations, Trump would likely continue to exert pressure on the leadership of the Palestinian Authority.

The American peace plan for the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, on which the Trump administration has been working in recent months, is expected to be based in part on early ideas that were presented – and some of which were agreed to – in the late 1970s, though they were dismissed out of hand by Yasser Arafat and Mahmoud Abbas. Trump is expected to add elements of his own, most (but not all) of them economic, as well as a creative solution to the problem of Jerusalem that may be acceptable to Israel (but probably won't be to the Palestinians).

In sum, the internal strength and stability of the US is a supreme interest to America's Western allies, particularly Israel. A stable US is one that can maintain and even strengthen Western hegemony in the international system at the expense of Russia and China while harnessing, rather than diverting, the international system.

The US under Trump can and should lead international moves such as a plan to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Notwithstanding President Trump's controversial personality, his foreign policy is actually traditional insofar as it is based on deterrence and the avoidance of direct confrontation. This is the Trump Doctrine in a nutshell. Its success will be greatly influenced by the administration's ability to function internally, which would allow Trump to continue to focus his efforts on the international arena.

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