

Foreign Policy Implications from Trump's Early Presidential Days

News:

Much has been written about US President Donald Trump's first 100 days in office. For obvious reasons the media has chosen to focus on his failures but very little has been mentioned about Trump's foreign policy.

Comment

The most important lesson to glean from Trump's first one hundred days in office is that it is business as usual. In fact, the argument can be made that Trump's foreign policy is more aggressive than his predecessor. In a short span of time, Trump authorized air strikes against Assad, spewed bellicose language against North Korea to new heights and deployed America's elite fighter jets in Estonia—a clear challenge to Russia.

Such actions are not only at odds with Trump's campaign promises but also indicate a shift in his administration's position on several matters. On Russia, Trump long hoped for a collaborative partnership with Putin, but faced stiff resistance from the establishment. The incessant media coverage against Trump's aids having covert relations with Russia combined with Pentagon's conquest of the NSA has upended any chance of cooperation.

The wholesale cleanout of the NSA starting with Mike Flynn, then followed by the ouster of the rightwing ideologues Bannon and Gorka, and the recent demotion of McFarland signals victory for General McMaster, Flynn's replacement. The US military now controls the NSA - the chief policy making body in the White House - the Pentagon and Homeland Security. The unprecedented influence of the military on American foreign policy has reduced Trump to issuing incongruent statements against both allies and adversaries. Recently, Defense Secretary Mattis politely contradicted his boss and reassured South Korea that that payment of \$1b for THAAD was not needed.

Trump's retreat on China is equally compelling. Only a few months ago, Trump threatened to overturn 40 years of US-Sino relations by reaching out to Taiwan, and during the campaign trail Trump often accused China of currency manipulation and taking away American jobs. By inviting Xi Jinping to Washington, the Trump administration sought greater cooperation in dissuading North Korea. However, the extent of China's cooperation is questionable because the build-up of American weaponry in the Asian Pacific is making Beijing extremely nervous.

At the outset of Trump's ascendancy to the White House, some observers expected Trump to reach a deal with Russia, and adopt a stern posture towards China. After a hundred days in office, Trump has abandoned cementing ties with Russia, and is trying to cajole China into playing an active role in deterring Pyongyang. If the story has a familiar ring to it then this is not surprising, as Obama was the original storyteller. The only difference is that Trump or shall we say the military has gone a step further to advance strategic military assets close to both Russia and China by using the pretext of North Korea.

The comprehensiveness of Trump's volte-face is not limited to revisionist states. Even, status quo states and close allies like Britain are in for a rude awakening. Trump has bumped Britain in favor of the EU to secure preferential trade deals. The Lords International Relations Select Committee report published this week is emphatic about "the mercurial and unpredictable nature of policymaking by President Trump" and has recommended the UK to

distance itself from the US. Speaking of trade, Trump has also indicated that the US may not withdraw from NAFTA after all. The apparent reversal may appease Mexico and Canada, but is certain to infuriate his supporters.

The taming of Trump by different sections of the establishment - US military, Wall Street and other factions - illustrates America's determination to maintain its economic and political hegemony around the world. America has invested too much in the liberal order and its international institutions to adopt isolationist tendencies, as much as Trump supporters would have liked. This implies that Trump's remaining days in office are expected to witness more foreign interventions and wars, unfair trade deals that favor America's national interest, an angry support base and of course more policy reversals.

The longevity of America's liberal order is established on the predictability of war and trade deals, America's enemies and adversaries know this very well. However, the unpredictability associated with Trump - the ease at which he back tracks on policy - is likely to spark a crisis in confidence in America's global position.

The uncertainty surrounding Trump will probably increase the anxiety amongst America's allies to look elsewhere for security and protection. Already, Europe is thinking about developing its own nuclear deterrent, and Japan and South Korea are not too far behind them.

Similarly, the ambiguity accompanying Trump's decisions will embolden America's adversaries to test America's resolve in areas, which were previously off limits. Syria, North Korea, South China Sea and the Middle East are potential theatres for such contests. This increases the probability of great power conflict, and has ushered in a new age of volatility and instability.

The uncertainty means that the strategic picture of the international situation is in continuous flux. At the time of the Messenger of Allah (saw), the international order witnessed fluctuations. Prior to the establishment of the first state in Medina, the Messenger of Allah (saw) was on the lookout for signs of confrontation amongst Persia and Rome—the great powers of Middle Ages were at war (Byzantine–Sassanid War of 602–628). The migration of the Messenger of Allah (saw) to Medina in 622 coincided with a campaign of fighting between the two great powers in Turkey. Hence, the present situation presents opportune moment for the sons of the Ummah, especially those in the armed forces to seize the initiative at the right time and establish the right guided Khilafah (Caliphate) on the method of the Prophethood. But is anyone amongst them aware and ready?

﴿يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا اسْتَجِيبُوا لِلَّهِ وَلِلرَّسُولِ إِذَا دَعَاكُمْ لِمَا يُحْيِيكُمْ وَاعْلَمُوا أَنَّ اللَّهَ يَحُولُ بَيْنَ الْمَرْءِ وَقَلْبِهِ وَأَنَّهُ إِلَيْهِ تُحْشَرُونَ﴾

“Oh you who have Iman! Answer Allah (by obeying Him) and (His) Messenger when he (saw) calls you to that which will give you life...” [TMQ; 8:24]

**Written for the Central Media Office of Hizb ut Tahrir by
Abdul Majeed Bhatti**