

Making Sense of Trump's Foreign Policy. Understanding How He Operates

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Global Research, January 12, 2019

[Strategic Culture Foundation](#)

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [History](#)

As was to be expected, the announcement that the US was withdrawing troops from Syria has served to provoke numerous reactions in the Middle East and beyond. Following the removal of Mattis, Pompey and Bolton embarked on a whirlwind Middle Eastern tour of Israel, Jordan, Egypt, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Oman, and Kuwait to reassure regional allies.

The idea of withdrawing US troops from Syria was based on Trump wishing to fulfil one of his most important electoral [promises](#). Trump knows that he needs to demonstrate to his electoral base that he has [kept the most significant promises](#) he made during his 2016 election campaign in order to have any chance of being reelected in 2020. People voted for [change](#), and that includes preventing new wars and getting out of the ones the US is already embroiled in, especially in the Middle East.

If Trump betrays his constituents by not delivering on his campaign promises, then he would simply be like any other politician who, upon being elected, soon forgets about those who put him in office. Trump is aware that such a perception would cost him the possibility of a second term.

We live in a time where Western elites completely ignore the consequences of their actions, manipulate information, lie to their citizens and spread fake news. While we may not always believe what Trumps says in his bombastic remarks, we can rest assured that MSNBC/CNN are even less reliable in terms of facts and unbiased news. Keeping oneself correctly informed is a difficult and demanding task, involving the constant comparison and weighing up of a lot of different sources and constantly researching and learning through the process. Most people do not have the time for this and usually do not care, preferring to rely instead on the mainstream media. This obviously exposes such people to manipulation, lies and distorted facts, clouding the truth and making it difficult to distinguish between what is real and what is fake. Alternative media — the real media — are riding to the rescue, but the overhauling process will require a full generation or even two.

This is why it little matters whether the wall will really built or whether it will only start to be built as a PR stunt or whether it even makes sense in the first place to build it or not. Democrats watching MSNBC/CNN will [agree](#) that it is a dumb idea and should not be funded. Republicans watching Fox News will call it a [brilliant idea](#) and demand a government shutdown (as Trumps is doing) to force the Democrats to concede. The point is that Democrats or Trump supporters, feeding on news sources based on propaganda and lies, will only have their respective biases confirmed without the need for any real debate.

What is important for us to understand is how Trump operates in order to gain the support of his base. That is what guides him in domestic, foreign and economic affairs. In the case of the wall, Trump's battle is against the Democrats, and the actions he has taken to fight his opponents is by using the government shutdown to provide himself with a win-win outcome. If the Democrats fund the wall, they lose in the eyes of their voters, as Trump ends up getting his wall. If the Democrats do not fund the wall, Trump [will blame](#) them and point to the government shutdown to demonstrate how he valiantly struggled against the Democrats in an effort to keep his promises.

The same is the case with the economic warfare employing the US dollar and imposing tariffs and duties on allies and enemies alike. MSNBC/CNN will tell you that this is damaging the American economy. The Democrats will say that it is a [failed strategy](#), without admitting that they hate Trump's "economic war" because it undermines [US dollar hegemony](#) and thereby their ability to prosecute the neoliberal imperialism to which they are so addicted.

Fox News, on the other hand, will spin the news to show how Trump is battling against Xi Jinping and China in the interests of American farmers. Self-proclaimed experts will go on about the success of the White House's economic strategy, declaring it a [brilliant idea](#). Trump voters will enjoy the coverage of Fox News and accordingly praise the "commercial war". Democrats will love the coverage of MSNBC/CNN and will worry about how various policies will either restore or further diminish US global leadership.

The announcement of the withdrawal from Syria follows the same logic as the examples given above. Trump announced the withdrawal only in order to keep an electoral promise. The entire Washington foreign-policy establishment is opposed to Trump's decision. The purpose of the announcement was to convey to his voters a simple but clear message: I am trying to do what I promised you, but I have everyone against me in Washington as well as in the media.

The same logic is employed with the government shutdown in order to fund the wall. Whenever Democrats, Republicans or talking heads condemn Trump's withdrawal from Syria/Afghanistan, his effort to build the wall, his imposition of tariffs and duties, his sanctions on Iran, they reinforce the beliefs of Trump's supporters, showing that Trump is really trying to keep his promises in the face of tremendous opposition.

Every time they bash him they provide free advertisement for Trump and his political line, and this has been going on from the first time he announced he would run in the primaries in 2015. It is a win-win situation for him, even if he does not *really* build the wall, pull out of Syria, or effectively reduce the trade imbalance between China and the US. If he succeeds, he can declare that he has kept his promises. If he fails, then he can lay the blame squarely at the feet of his political opponents. People elected him on the basis of his words and promises. If he can demonstrate that he at least tried to keep his promises (even if he never actually does), then that should be enough to give him a second term.

Trump understands very well how the media works and how much Washington detests him. He does not want to change the status quo and revolutionize Washington. He does not want to openly [challenge the foreign-policy establishment](#) by following a realist-isolationist policy. That was what he said in 2015/16 during the campaign trail, but his presidency has been [much different](#) from what he promised, especially in foreign policy. Nevertheless, Trump seeks re-election, and he cannot entirely break with the Washington establishment if

he hopes to succeed. Indeed in 2016 he demonstrated this by appointing a staff of generals whose credo over the span of several decades has been that of [American exceptionalism](#), the governing religion of Washington. He used the military to protect himself from the media-intelligence community, shielding himself with four generals (Kelly, McMaster, Mattis and Flynn), in the full knowledge that none of them would support a realist-isolationist policy.

For this reason, the ructions that have followed the announcement of the withdrawal from Syria are part of normal US political theater, such as was the case with the resignation/dismissal of Mattis. It is no surprise that the deep state immediately dispatched Bolton and Pompeo to sooth the concerns of dozens of US allies, in particular Israel and the Arab states. It was a PR exercise to reassure them of the real intentions of the US in the area (i.e., enduring imperialism).

In practice, it makes little difference whether the US has 2,000 or 200 men in Syria. They will [not be able to change](#) the course of the war of aggression against Damascus in their favor. It is therefore not surprising that Bolton was not fired for publicly [contradicting](#) Trump on the question of withdrawing troops from Syria. Such contradictions play in Trump's favor. His supporters will say that Trump is so anti-establishment that even his closest collaborators are against him.

If Trump were to fire Bolton as he did Mattis, none of his faithful voters will remember the ill-considered choice to appoint him in the first place, and will be struck instead by Trump's determination to stick to his guns and rid himself of internal saboteurs who stand in the way of his electoral mandate. As long as Trump, in our scenario, were not to name someone worse than Bolton, the imperialist wheel will continue to turn.

Just look at North Korea as an example. Trump threatened to destroy Pyongyang, even knowing the US could not *really* do so. Then he meet with Kim, did an epic PR exercise that presented Trump as solving a major international problem that had eluded all his predecessors. After conveying this triumph to his base, he simply forgot all about Kim, Pyongyang and Seoul. In the meantime, the two Koreas are nonetheless speaking, advancing reconciliation and preparing for [historical changes](#). As for Trump, he has already moved on, North Korea no longer holding his interest, the drama having served its purpose for a certain time but no longer being of relevance. (This, thankfully, is to the benefit of the Korean people.)

It seems the same playbook is being employed in Syria. Trump announced the withdrawal, while leaving a few hundred soldiers behind who continue to be unable to change the situation on the ground; Bolton and Pompeo are dispatched to reassure allies/financiers, though Trump cannot wait to forget about Syria, proclaiming the falsehood that US, under his leadership, defeated ISIS (thereby fulfilling one of his electoral promises).

As I [wrote](#) following Trump's election, The Donald's victory only served to [accelerate the transition](#) to a multipolar world, as we saw in the first two years of his presidency, with Trump's focus on his base translating into a perennial electoral campaign that uses all the tools at his disposal (domestic, foreign, economic, financial, and currency policy). This creates distrust and concern amongst historical allies and pushes [Washington's enemies closer together](#), serving in the process to smooth out any tensions that may have hitherto existed between these countries.

Just think of the Astana format of Turkey, Iran and Russia concerning Syria, Inter-Korean talks in Asia, a peace treaty to be signed between Russia and Japan, Indian-Iranian cooperation on trade in oil, a European stance against Iranian and Russian sanctions, and, to top it off, coordination between the Russians and the Chinese on almost everything. All this is in the name of opposing US imperialist policies or trying to directly score a political win against Donald Trump and his policies.

Trump's enemies have learned to [ignore US decisions](#), which have now become irrelevant in certain parts of the globe. America's historical allies cling hopefully to the words of Bolton and Pompeo, well aware that the US will not soon change their basic neoliberal and imperialist approach towards the world. Nevertheless, Washington is losing military and economic influence due to the [transition into a multipolar world order](#), where power is shared among multiple countries (China, Russia, Iran, India). The [unipolar moment is over](#) and is not coming back, especially not with Donald Trump as president. And that is a good thing for the rest of the world.

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