

Who Is the Real Enemy?

The White House is targeting Iran but should instead focus on Saudi Arabia

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It is one of the great ironies that the United States, a land mass protected by two broad oceans while also benefiting from the world's largest economy and most powerful military, persists in viewing itself as a potential victim, vulnerable and surrounded by enemies. In reality, there are only two significant potential threats to the U.S. The first consists of the only two non-friendly countries - Russia and China - that have nuclear weapons and delivery systems that could hit the North American continent and the second is the somewhat more amorphous danger represented by international terrorism.

And even given that, I would have to qualify the nature of the threats. Russia and China are best described as adversaries or competitors rather than enemies as they have compelling interests to avoid war, even if Washington is doing its best to turn them hostile. Neither has anything to gain and much to lose by escalating a minor conflict into something that might well start World War 3. Indeed, both have strong incentives to avoid doing so, which makes the actual threat that they represent more speculative than real. And, on the plus side, both can be extremely useful in dealing with international issues where Washington has little or no leverage, to include resolving the North Korea problem and Syria, so they U.S. has considerable benefits to be gained by cultivating their cooperation.

Also, I would characterize international terrorism as a faux threat at a national level, though one that has been exaggerated through the media and fearmongering to such an extent that it appears much more dangerous than it actually is. It has been observed that more Americans are killed by falling furniture than by terrorists in a year but terrorism has a particularly potency due to its unpredictability and the fear that it creates. Due to that fear, American governments and businesses at all levels have been willing to spend a trillion dollars per annum to defeat what might rationally be regarded as a relatively minor problem.

So if the United States were serious about dealing with or deflecting the actual threats against the American people it could first of all reduce its defense expenditures to make them commensurate with the actual threat before concentrating on three things. First, would be to establish a solid *modus vivendi* with Russia and China to avoid conflicts of interest that could develop into actual tit-for-tat escalation. That would require an acceptance by Washington of the fact that both Moscow and Beijing have regional spheres of influence that are defined by their interests. You don't have to like the governance of either country, but their national interests have to be appreciated and respected just as the United States has legitimate interests within its own hemisphere that must be respected by

Russia and China.

Second, Washington must, unfortunately, continue to spend on the Missile Defense Agency, which supports anti-missile defenses if the search for a *modus vivendi* for some reason fails. Mutual assured destruction is not a desirable strategic doctrine but being able to intercept incoming missiles while also having some capability to strike back if attacked is a realistic deterrent given the proliferation of nations that have both ballistic missiles and nukes.

Third and finally, there would be a coordinated program aimed at international terrorism based equally on where the terror comes from and on physically preventing the terrorist attacks from taking place. This is the element in national defense that is least clear cut. Dealing with Russia and China involves working with mature regimes that have established diplomatic and military channels. Dealing with terrorist non-state players is completely different as there are generally speaking no such channels.

It should in theory be pretty simple to match threats and interests with actions since there are only a handful that really matter, but apparently it is not so in practice. What is Washington doing? First of all, the White House is deliberately turning its back on restoring a good working relationship with Russia by insisting that Crimea be returned to Kiev, by blaming Moscow for the continued unrest in Donbas, and by attacking Syrian military targets in spite of the fact that Russia is an ally of the legitimate government in Damascus and the United States is an interloper in the conflict. Meanwhile congress and the media are poisoning the waters through their dogged pursuit of Russiagate for political reasons even though nearly a year of investigation has produced no actual evidence of malfeasance on the part of U.S. officials and precious little in terms of Moscow's alleged interference.

Playing tough to the international audience has unfortunately become part of the American Exceptionalism DNA. Upon his arrival in Warsaw last week, Donald Trump [doubled down](#) on the Russia-bashing, calling on Moscow to "cease its destabilizing activities in Ukraine and elsewhere and its support for hostile regimes including Syria and Iran." He then recommended that Russia should "join the community of responsible nations in our fight against common enemies and in defense of civilization itself."

The comments in Warsaw were unnecessary, even if the Poles wanted to hear them, and were both highly insulting and ignorant. It was not a good start for Donald's second overseas trip, even though the speech has otherwise been interpreted as a welcome defense of Western civilization and European values. Trump also followed up with a two hour plus discussion with President Vladimir Putin in which the two apparently agreed to differ on the alleged Russian hacking of the American election. The Trump-Putin meeting indicated that restoring some kind of working relationship with Russia is still possible, as it is in everyone's interest to do so.

Fighting terrorism is quite another matter and the United States approach is the reverse of what a rational player would be seeking to accomplish. The U.S. is rightly assisting in the bid to eradicate ISIS in Syria and Iraq but it is simultaneously attacking the most effective fighters against that group, namely the Syrian government armed forces and the Shi'ite militias being provided by Iran and Hezbollah. Indeed, it is becoming increasingly clear that at least some in the Trump Administration are seeking to use the Syrian engagement as a stepping stone to war with Iran.

As was the case in the months preceding the ill-fated invasion of Iraq in 2003, all buttons are being pushed to vilify Iran. Recent reports suggest that two individuals in the White House in particular have been pressuring the Trump administration's generals to escalate U.S. involvement in Syria to bring about a war with Tehran sooner rather than later. They are Ezra Cohen-Watnick and Derek Harvey, reported to be holdovers from the team brought into the White House by the virulently anti-Iranian former National Security Adviser Michael Flynn.

Cohen-Watnick is thirty years old and [has little relevant experience](#) for the position he holds, senior director for intelligence on the National Security Council. But his inexperience counts for little as he is good friend of son-in-law Jared Kushner. He has told the *New York Times* that "wants to use American spies to help oust the Iranian government," a comment that reflects complete ignorance, both regarding Iran and also concerning spy agency capabilities. His partner in crime Harvey, a former military officer who advised General David Petraeus when he was in Iraq, is the NSC advisor on the Middle East.

Both Cohen-Watnick and Harvey share the neoconservative belief that the Iranians and their proxies in Syria and Iraq need to be confronted by force, [an opportunity](#) described by *Foreign Policy* magazine as having developed into "a pivotal moment that will determine whether Iran or the United States exerts influence over Iraq and Syria." Other neocon promoters of conflict with Iran have described their horror at a possible Shi'ite "bridge" or "land corridor" through the Arab heartland, running from Iran itself through Iraq and Syria and connecting on the Mediterranean with Hezbollah in Lebanon.

What danger to the U.S. or its actual treaty allies an Iranian influenced land corridor would constitute remains a mystery but there is no shortage of Iran haters in the White House. Former senior CIA analyst Paul Pillar [sees](#) "unrelenting hostility from the Trump administration" towards Iran and notes "cherry-picking" of the intelligence to make a case for war, similar to what occurred with Iraq in 2002-3. And even though Secretary of Defense James Mattis and National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster have pushed back against the impulsive Cohen-Watnick and Harvey, their objections are tactical as they do not wish to make U.S. forces in the region vulnerable to attacks coming from a new direction. Otherwise they too consider Iran as America's number one active enemy and believe that war is inevitable. Donald Trump has unfortunately also jumped directly into the argument on the side of Saudi Arabia and Israel, both of which would like to see Washington go to war with Tehran on their behalf.

The problem with the Trump analysis is that he has his friends and enemies confused. He is actually supporting Saudi Arabia, the source of most of the terrorism that has convulsed Western Europe and the United States while also killing hundreds of thousands of fellow Muslims. Random terrorism to kill as many "infidels and heretics" as possible to create fear is a Sunni Muslim phenomenon, supported financially and doctrinally by the Saudis. To be sure, Iran has used terror tactics to eliminate opponents and select targets overseas, to include several multiple-victim bombings, but it has never engaged in anything like the recent series of attacks in France and Britain. So the United States is moving seemingly inexorably towards war with a country that itself constitutes no actual terrorist threat, unless it is attacked, in support of a country that very much is part of the threat and also on behalf of Israel, which for its part would prefer to see Americans die in a war against Iran rather than sacrificing its own sons and daughters.

Realizing who the real enemy actually is and addressing the actual terrorism problem would

not only involve coming down very hard on Saudi Arabia rather than Iran, it would also require some serious thinking in the White House about the extent to which America's armed interventions all over Asia and Africa have made many people hate us enough to strap on a suicide vest and have a go. Saudi financing and Washington's propensity to go to war and thereby create a deep well of hatred just might be the principal causative elements in the rise of global terrorism. Do I think that Donald Trump's White House has the courage to take such a step and change direction? Unfortunately, no.

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