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Commentary: The unpredictable Trump doctrine

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Donald Trump has finally given us greater insight into his approach to foreign policy. Last week, he not only conducted interviews with the Washington Post and New York Times, but revealed his long-promised list of foreign policy advisers, and addressed the annual AIPAC conference. His remarks led some to note that a restrained or realist worldview was implicit in Trump's statements.

Unfortunately, for those who seek a more restrained foreign policy, there is little reason to celebrate. Even a stopped clock may be right twice a day. And as the man's own remarks show, the Trump Doctrine isn't actually about restraint, it's about unpredictability. And there's every reason to believe that is exactly what the man would deliver as president.

In a political landscape dominated by neoconservative and hawkish candidates, some of Trump's statements are certainly appealing. He admits that the invasion of Iraq was a mistake, a view now shared by a majority of Americans. He decries the costs of nation-building and consistent military intervention abroad.

Trump has also criticized American military spending to defend U.S. allies in NATO and elsewhere around the world. The United States spends the lion's share of both NATO's budget, and its operational costs. It is little wonder, perhaps, that Trump's point resonates with many Americans who wonder why they should be picking up the tab for our some of our wealthiest allies.

Yet though Trump sometimes advocates more restrained foreign policy ideas, he frequently also expresses extremely hawkish ideas. At his AIPAC speech, Trump pledged to prevent regional aggression by Iran, and promised to dismantle the Obama administration's nuclear deal. He promises to "knock the hell out of ISIS," and proposed sending 20,000 to 30,000 troops to fight the group.

Other statements simply make no sense. Trump has repeatedly called for U.S. troops to seize Middle Eastern oil by force, a proposal that would require either a major permanent military occupation, or some miraculous advance in drilling technology. He appears to believe that hostages formed a part of the Iranian nuclear deal. And he refuses to answer questions on whether he would use nuclear weapons against ISIS.

Indeed, it is nearly impossible to tell whether he actually believes these statements, or is simply monumentally ill-informed. Based on his comments to the Washington Post, Trump is apparently unaware of European sanctions on Russia, of the fact that Iran and ISIS oppose each other, and believes that America's GDP is "essentially zero."

If we step back from substantive issues, however, another pattern emerges: unpredictability. Trump has flip-flopped on issues ranging from Syria to Afghanistan to visa policy. When confronted with these inconsistencies, he has denied his prior comments, obfuscated, and even praised his own flexibility.

Unlike many politicians who moderate between the primary and general election, Trump actually touts his unpredictability as a foreign policy virtue. As early as June last year, Trump promised that he had a secret plan to defeat ISIS, which he could not reveal for fear of giving too much away. And in the Post interview, Trump similarly refused to detail his strategy for dealing with China, arguing that other countries cannot know what he will do once he is president.

As a foreign policy doctrine, this is highly problematic. For voters, more hawkish Americans cannot tell if President Trump would withdraw from NATO or strike a grand bargain with Russia. Restraint-minded Americans cannot tell if he would commit us to further Middle East wars.

At the same time, other countries are watching and worrying, unsure what sort of foreign policy will emerge from a Trump White House. Such unpredictability, combined with Trump's erratic and thin-skinned personality, is surely a recipe for unexpected conflict.

Nor do Trump's newly announced advisers offer much reassurance. Campaign advisers often act as a signal, illustrating the kind of foreign policy a candidate is expected to pursue. But Trump's advisers are all over the map, including two minor Bush administration officials, a recent graduate and energy consultant, and a Lebanese-born pundit with ties to militia groups in that country.

Not only do Trump's advisers present no clear picture of whether or not he would pursue a more restrained foreign policy, the list is so short and so scattershot that it seems likely Trump is still having substantial difficulties attracting experienced foreign policy advisers.

Unfortunately, greater exposure to Trump's ideas has not substantially increased our understanding of his foreign policy views. His consistent unpredictability is problematic for the effective and rational conduct of foreign policy, even before you factor in the odious comments on Muslims and Mexicans or his incitement of political violence.

So when Trump says something you like on foreign policy, remember that tomorrow he will most likely change his mind. For all our disagreements, hawks and doves can certainly agree how dangerous such unpredictability would be.

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