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Trump's Unpredictability Doctrine

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Emma Ashford does a fine job summing up the flaws in Trump's handling of foreign policy issues:

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.

Ashford does a better job than I did in my post earlier this week in explaining why Trump's foreign policy isn't what some of his conservative and libertarian supporters have tried to make it out to be. It isn't just that Trump's positions are incoherent, contradictory, and prone to change at the drop of a hat, but he also takes pride in not taking clear positions on many important issues for the sake of keeping everyone—both foreign adversaries and the voters—in the dark. That isn't clever or desirable. It is the *modus operandi* of a charlatan who doesn't want his marks to know what he's up to until it's too late.

When Trump is pressed to commit to a position, he often demurs because he doesn't want to "give away" what he will do. This allows him to avoid taking a firm position one way or the other on many questions, and that in turn lets him hide his extraordinary ignorance of the relevant issues. He mimics many hawks in his refusal to rule things out, and recently took this to an absurd extreme when he is asked if he will use nuclear weapons in Europe. He says he won't use them, but also says he doesn't want to "take any cards off the table." In his interviews with *The New York Times*, he didn't want to state his position on whether the U.S. should or shouldn't go to war over disputed territories in the South China Sea:

Would I go to war? Look, let me just tell you. There's a question I wouldn't want to answer. Because I don't want to say I won't or I will or – do you understand that, David? That's the problem with our country. A politician would say, 'Oh I would never go to war,' or they'd say, 'Oh I would go to war.' I don't want to say what I'd do because, again, we need unpredictability. You know, if I win, I don't want to be in a position where I've said I would or I wouldn't. I don't want them to know what I'm thinking.

Besides being a huge disservice to the voters, this excessive reliance on ambiguity just creates more opportunities for other governments to misunderstand U.S. commitments and to miscalculate when making their own decisions. Ambiguity may occasionally be valuable, but in most cases it creates unnecessary confusion and uncertainty. Refusing to answer questions on major issues because the candidate doesn't "want them to know" what he's thinking is nothing more than a dodge, and one that should make all voters wary of the candidate regardless of their policy views. No one really knows what kind of foreign policy they would get from a Trump administration, and the candidate wants to keep it that way. His fans and his die-hard opponents think they can guess what he would do, and that's why they support or oppose him so strongly, but in the end all they're doing is guessing based on extremely limited information. Even if Trump happens to be taking what you think is the right positions on some issues at the moment, those positions are liable to change just as his positions have changed in the past. Ashford concluded:

So when Trump says something you like on foreign policy, remember that tomorrow he will most likely change his mind.

Trump prizes unpredictability in foreign policy, and for that reason can't be relied on to do what he says.