



## Trump's wisdom on Syria and Afghanistan vs. his rashness on Venezuela

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The best line of Tuesday night's State of the Union was President Trump's assertion that "great countries do not fight endless wars." Indeed, breaking with his closest advisors, the President followed this up by reminding America of two overdue steps: that the U.S. would soon withdraw troops from Syria, and would accelerate peace negotiations in Afghanistan.

These long-overdue steps are strategically wise, but raise a key question: Why is the President — even as he makes the right decisions in Syria and Afghanistan — so keen to make the same mistakes in Venezuela?

Certainly, throughout his first two years in office, Trump's foreign policy has been fraught with contradictions. Take his photo opportunity summits with Kim Jong Un — a welcome step towards diplomacy. But go back just a year and you may remember that it was Trump himself who raised tensions and almost tweeted us into a war.

Likewise, the President's trenchant criticisms of the costs of America's Middle East wars don't actually reflect reality, as his administration has instead increased troop commitments to that region by over 33%. His insults to friendly countries, inclination to cozy up to dictators and inability to rein in an itchy Twitter finger have resulted in a chaotic and bizarre foreign policy.

But we must give credit where credit is due. Trump is right on Syria, and he's right on Afghanistan. With the bulk of ISIS forces defeated, there are no U.S. interests at stake in Syria. Indeed, the presence of thousands of U.S. troops on the ground in Syria risks dragging us further into a major conflict which doesn't concern us. Perhaps more importantly, it risks the lives of those soldiers for no clear objective.

In Afghanistan, too, the decision to accelerate negotiations and talk to the Taliban is the right choice. Ultimately, it should lead to the withdrawal of U.S. troops from that conflict. Afghanistan has been a military stalemate for many years, and the United States has achieved its original interests in avenging the 9/11 attacks. The country may not be fully stable, but there is no real likelihood that the continued presence of U.S. forces will improve the situation. To borrow a line from last night's speech, it's time to give our troops there "a warm welcome home."

What makes these decisions all the more remarkable is that the President continues to defy his advisors on these issues. Indeed, in recent weeks Trump advisors from Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to National Security Adviser John Bolton have gone out of their way to persuade Middle Eastern allies that these withdrawals won't happen. Both are keen to maintain troops in Syria as an anti-Iran force. Assuming that the president sticks to his guns — an open question

given past backpedaling — he will have triumphed over an entrenched status quo mindset to improve American foreign policy.

Yet all of this only makes the President's approach towards Venezuela in recent weeks even stranger. Instead of fears of American overextension or "foolish wars," Trump continues to escalate U.S. involvement. From the appointment of neoconservative Elliot Abrams as special envoy for Venezuela to Trump's repeated assertions that military action is still on the table, he appears willing to entertain a policy strongly at odds with his Syria withdrawal.

Although the administration has not yet taken any military steps on Venezuela, the risks are indeed high. U.S. oil sanctions are already dramatically worsening the economic situation inside Venezuela, and a brewing conflict over whether humanitarian aid will be admitted to the country has the potential to suddenly tip the situation into violent confrontation.

The contrast could not be more stark. In Syria, Trump is arguing for pragmatism and America's national interest. In Venezuela, he's taking a massive gamble in recognizing Juan Guaido as president and supporting the Venezuelan opposition.

That gamble could pay off, but it could equally go wrong, pulling the United States into an unnecessary military intervention, and a likely years-long quagmire. The administration has so far refused to entertain the possibility of negotiation — the Pope, for example, has suggested that he might mediate the conflict — and has instead taken a hard line towards the Maduro government.

If the President truly wants to build an America First foreign policy, he should build on these decisions by listening to his instincts — and not to his advisers — on Venezuela.

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