



## Trump's First 100 Days: Dazed and Confused Foreign Policy

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For foreign policy wonks, Trump's first hundred days have been a bit like a roller coaster ride. In just over three months, the new administration has veered from one crisis to another, from Syria to North Korea, China to Canada.

Sudden Trumpian reversals on various foreign policy issues have been sharp enough to produce whiplash. Meanwhile, a dizzying barrage of strange foreign policy choices and statements makes it difficult to guess what's coming next.

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Nevertheless, amid all the confusion, there are a couple of big takeaways from these first 100 days that may help us better understand where Trump's foreign policy approach is headed:

#### **1. There really is no such thing as the Trump Doctrine**

Trump's reversals on issues like NATO have been hailed by some as bringing him closer to a "normal" presidency. Indeed, it is not always obvious from a President's campaign what his broad foreign policy approach will end up being, or the obstacles and inertia that he will face in trying to alter American foreign policy.

Yet even by these standards, Trump's approach to the world remains unclear. A recent attempt by White House Chief of Staff Reince Priebus to outline what he sees as the Trump Doctrine merely adds to this confusion:

*Trump is "reshaping our position in the world," Priebus said, and "really establishing, I think, a Trump Doctrine in setting some certain lines of where we're not going to allow people like [Syrian President Bashar al-Assad] to go, but at the same time making it clear that we're not interested in long-term, you know, ground wars in the Middle East, but obviously focusing in on ISIS and what we're doing in the Middle East to protect us here in the United States, working with China on ongoing issues with North Korea that are very real and are serious issues that takes cooperation within the region to handle appropriately."*

Another official “added that Trump’s status as ‘an incredible negotiator’ is also central to the doctrine.” As these statements suggest, Trump’s foreign policy so far has been highly reactive – responding to crises – but with no indication of an overarching strategy.

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## **2. Trump is escalating the War on Terror**

Though the most visible indicator of this escalation was the use of a MOAB ( Massive Ordnance Air Blast bomb ), affectionately known as the ‘Mother of all Bombs,’ in Afghanistan, the new administration has chosen to escalate conflicts in a number of countries.

More troops are being sent to the greater Middle East, in particular to join the fight against ISIS in Syria and Iraq, and U.S. Special Operations Forces are now engaging in ground actions against Al Qaeda in Yemen.

The administration has also loosened the rules of engagement in Yemen, Afghanistan, Somalia and elsewhere, and has increased the number of bombing raids and drone strikes.

According to at least one watchdog group, Trump’s choice to give his generals a free hand in these conflicts has resulted in a massive increase in civilian casualties in these areas.

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## **3. Brinksmanship may be back**

The new president appears to have a gift for raising tensions around the world. Though his administration did certify that Iran is complying with the Obama-era nuclear deal, they also announced a 90-day review of the deal. Various officials are using increasingly tough rhetoric towards Iran.

The administration has also indicated that it intends to step up support for the Gulf Cooperation Council campaign in Yemen against the Houthis, a group often described as an Iranian proxy.

Trump is also taking an increasingly hard line towards North Korea, with Vice President Mike Pence warning the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) that “all options are on the table” in the case of further missile or nuclear tests. Tensions around the peninsula are high, with joint U.S.-South Korean drills, and a North Korean live fire exercise taking place this week.

Whether the new administration’s statements are accurate indicators of their position, or merely heated rhetoric, such statements can easily raise the potential for conflict.

## **4. Advisors really matter**

Political science research has shown that even experienced advisors cannot substitute for an inexperienced president. Unfortunately, Trump is anything but experienced on foreign policy. And while some of his appointments have been reassuringly experienced (such as James Mattis, now Secretary of Defense), others are either inexperienced (such as Jared Kushner) or have disturbing worldviews (i.e., Steve Bannon).

Infighting between advisors inside the administration has been notable during these first hundred days, and Trump’s policies seem to vary depending on which individuals he is listening to on any given day.

If you are interested in the internal dynamics of the Trump administration, you can check out my recent article at [War on the Rocks](#), which explores the civil war in the White House.

The Cliffs Notes version? Advisors really matter, and it's still unclear which faction – if any – will triumph in the struggle for influence between Trump's teams of rivals.

## **5. Competence is key**

Some of Trump's foreign policy decisions appear to be trending closer to a traditionally hawkish Republican line, while some of the problems that he faces – such as [Turkish-Kurdish tensions](#) in Northern Syria, or the intractable conflict in Afghanistan – have been around for far longer than this administration.

Yet it is worth noting that the new administration's response to various crises has often been less than competent. Some of this is the result of inexperience and a [lack of appointed officials](#) in key positions at the Departments of State and Defense, but others are self-inflicted wounds. The administration's immigration bans and TPP withdrawal are cases in point.

Other foreign policy incidents have been frankly bizarre.

Trump's first National Security Advisor, Mike Flynn, was [forced to resign](#) after only 25 days for misleading the administration on his lobbying and ties to Turkey and Russia.

In an oval office meeting, Trump refused to [shake Angela Merkel's hand](#), later claiming that he didn't hear the request.

He phoned Turkish premier [Recep Tayyip Erdogan](#) to congratulate him on a questionable referendum victory that consolidated his dictatorial power.

Moreover, the administration [misplaced an aircraft carrier](#), announcing that the USS Carl Vinson was heading for the Korean Peninsula as a show of force, when in fact it was near Australia, moving in the other direction.

Taken alone, these incidents are concerning. But when considered in the broader context of Trump's tendency to bluster and saber-rattle, his support for escalating the war on terror, and his inability to articulate any coherent strategy for U.S. foreign policy, they raise even bigger questions.

If Trump's first hundred days are truly representative of his foreign policy approach, it's going to be a bumpy four years.

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