

WAR ON | THE ROCKS

The Real Factions of Trumpland and U.S. Foreign Policy

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A civil war rumbles on, driven by ancient hatreds and more recent grudges. From the outside, concerned observers note the carnage and damage to state institutions. They worry about who will govern once the conflict is over. With the exception of Russia, external actors mostly favor the conflict's moderate factions, and fret about growing extremism among the combatants. Whichever side triumphs, the consequences for regional and global security could be severe.

I'm talking, of course, about the Trump administration.

Three months into Donald Trump's presidency, top administration officials contradict one another with regularity, and both friendly and less friendly states openly wonder who is calling the shots on America's role in the world. The administration seems united in a desire to expand U.S. involvement in the fight against terrorism, sending thousands more troops to the Middle East. Yet some of Trump's other foreign policy decisions have proved more contentious: The President apparently resisted Steve Bannon's pleas not to strike Syria last week, siding instead with his son-in-law, Jared Kushner.

Some have portrayed Trump's foreign policy as a Jekyll-and-Hyde problem, with a coterie of seasoned advisors trying to persuade the new president to adopt "good" policies — typically the foreign policy status quo — while reining in his darker, Jekyll-like impulses. But the good vs. evil frame is an oversimplification of a more complicated internal struggle: The Trump administration isn't made up of two factions but several, each fighting for a distinct foreign policy worldview.

Steve Bannon's recent fall from grace is one battle in this internal conflict. And like complex civil wars in Syria and elsewhere, if you want to understand Trump's foreign policy, you need to understand the factions, their disagreements, and what the eventual ceasefire may look like.

The Factions of Trumpland

Let's start with everyone's favorite civil war faction, the "moderate rebels." Here, this term is best applied to scholars and academics who favor moderating the goals of U.S. foreign policy. During the campaign, numerous articles suggested that Trump would provide an opening for these realist and restraint-oriented scholars to challenge the status quo.

Of course, like most moderate rebels, this group doesn't really exist, at least not inside this administration. Aside from a few realist-sounding Trumpian pronouncements and a shared

propensity for transactional foreign policy, there is little evidence of any realist influence on Trump's foreign policy.

Even Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's advocacy of realist ideas was limited to a few statements in his confirmation hearings, most notably the idea that America "must see the world for what it is ... and understand that our power is considerable but not infinite." His tenure has thus far been spent dodging the press and rattling around the State Department's empty seventh floor.

Moving to groups that actually exist within the administration, we find a faction that is often similarly described as moderates, though perhaps it is better to describe them simply as "grown-ups." They have prior experience in foreign policy and supposedly have the ability to constrain Trump's wilder foreign policy ideas. But just like Syria's moderate Islamists, this group is only moderate in comparison to its peers.

In reality, this group — all card-carrying members of the blob — differ widely in their stances on U.S. foreign policy, and all have some views that might be cause for concern in another administration. Take Trump's hawkish Vice President Mike Pence. Pence dealt with foreign policy as a congressman, especially during a stint on the House Foreign Affairs Committee. He supported the Iraq surge, once voted for a congressional bill that would have barred George W. Bush from setting any timeline to withdraw U.S. troops from Iraq, and has argued that the United States should confront Russia in Syria.

Or take Secretary of Defense James Mattis, who, despite his well-deserved reputation as a strategic thinker, has described Iran as "the single most enduring threat to stability and peace" in the Middle East. That proposition is debatable: Iran has undoubtedly been a destabilizing regional force, but other factors such as Saudi financing for extremism, the U.S. invasion of Iraq, and the legacies of the Arab Spring have all contributed to today's Middle East turmoil. Yet Mattis' dislike of Iran colors his approach to the region. In April last year, Mattis openly argued, "What is the one country in the Middle East that has not been attacked by ISIS? One. That is Iran. That is more than happenstance, I'm sure."

Thanks to Trump's penchant for a well-pressed uniform, many of the grown-ups are former or current military officers. This makes it harder to discern their true views on foreign policy, though all share some commitment to maintaining and perpetuating America's global network of security commitments. Some — such as National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster — have pushed back against Trump's wilder policy proposals, while others — most notably Secretary of Homeland Security John Kelly — seem to have bought into Trump's ideas on immigration, trade, and foreign policy.

In doing so, Kelly forms a temporary battlefield alliance with another group, best known as the "Jacksonians." They have fairly conventional views on U.S. military power, but not on trade, immigration, and alliances. The militaristic, Jacksonian-bent of Trump's foreign policy pronouncements — a strand of American thinking first identified by the historian Walter Russell Mead — has been widely noted, suggesting that this might be how Trump himself understands foreign relations.

Indeed, Trump's speeches never fail to emphasize military power, brash nationalism, and American greatness — all ideas typical of a Jacksonian approach to foreign policy. His antipathy towards alliances, insistence that other countries pay their own way, and hostility to the decades-

old open liberal trading order that the U.S. has built likewise fit into this framework. Trump's budget proposal, boosting military spending at the cost of diplomacy and foreign aid, also emphasizes these priorities.

The Jacksonians are a small group within the administration: Michael Anton, a former Bush administration official, has attempted to articulate the intellectual case for a Trumpian foreign policy, arguing that the United States should focus on global prestige, peace, and prosperity. The president's initial insistence on keeping K.T. MacFarland as his deputy national security advisor, typically attributed to his fondness for cable news stars, could also be related to her Jacksonian bent.

Yet, while Jacksonians are often hostile to multilateral and multinational cooperation, they are generally content to remain at home, with little desire to go abroad in search of monsters to destroy. They are certainly not antiwar, but oppose nation-building and global campaigns, a stance which contrasts strongly with the final faction within the administration, Steve Bannon's civilizational crusaders, or "Trumpian jihadis."

This group draws implicitly on the ideas of Samuel Huntington. While Huntington himself argued that the clash of civilizations was in many ways regrettable and should be vigorously avoided if possible, his work has often been favored by those who seek a civilizational war against Islam. Bannon, the president's chief strategist, has described Islam as worse than communism and fascism. To extend an analogy, if Trump's Jacksonians are like Syria's domestic extremist groups — focusing largely on domestic issues — then Trumpian jihadis may be more akin to the self-proclaimed Islamic State, with broader aspirations to reshape the globe in their image.

One key member of this group has already been eliminated: Mike Flynn. He had argued that "we're in a world war against a messianic mass movement of evil people, most of them inspired by a totalitarian ideology: Radical Islam." But others with similar views remain, including Sebastian Gorka, a self-proclaimed terrorism expert with questionable expertise, and Stephen Miller, formerly of Breitbart, who was reportedly the architect of the Trump administration's Muslim travel ban.

These individuals, centered around the Strategic Initiatives Group, were initially expected to act as a counterweight to McMaster's National Security Council in intra-administration struggles. But with last week's surprise removal of Bannon as a formal member of the National Security Council, the White House downplaying the importance of the Strategic Initiatives Group, and growing rumors that Trump is dissatisfied with Bannon, it remains to be seen how much influence they will have.

Finally, as in all conflicts, there are some wildcards: individuals who move between groups based on issue or short-term advantage. These wildcards are largely foreign policy neophytes, from Trump's U.N. ambassador Nikki Haley to Jared Kushner to Ivanka Trump. Kushner has no real foreign policy experience and little is known about his views. Yet it may be this lack of alignment with any major administration faction that has resulted in an impressive laundry list of foreign policy problems — Mexico, China, Iraq and Israel — that Kushner has been assigned by his father-in-law. In recent weeks, Trump seems have somewhat reverted to his nepotistic roots, relying more heavily on family members than on advisors such as Bannon.

The Battles

Every administration has to contend with internal splits on foreign policy at some point in its tenure. Indeed, the Obama administration often faced criticisms for insufficiently consulting with the Defense and State Departments prior to making decisions, while a variety of memoirs describe the administration's internal disagreements over whether or not to intervene in Libya in 2011. Yet the scope of today's discord inside the Trump administration is impressive.

For starters, there is little agreement inside the administration on America's role in the world, and on whether the United States should commit to maintaining the postwar liberal international order. The Jacksonians and jihadis tend to view America's security commitments as a bad deal, pointing to NATO's free-rider problem, and the wealth and prosperity of many allies for whom the United States essentially foots the bill.

There is a grain of truth to this criticism of U.S. alliance spending: Only four other NATO member states spend at least 2 percent of GDP on defense as called for by NATO guidelines, and the alliance is heavily reliant on the United States for essential military capabilities. Yet Bannon and Trump also seem to carry an impressive level of antagonism towards any form of international cooperation. Both have been notably hostile to the European Union, and both supported the Brexit vote. Indeed, Trump has described the trading bloc as a "vehicle for Germany" and has repeatedly questioned which country will leave the European Union next.

For many critics, this dispute implies a battle between good and evil, with the administration's grown-ups valiantly trying to restrain Trump's willingness to destroy key components of the liberal international order. This battle is primarily one of public relations: From Secretary Mattis' trip to Japan and South Korea to reassure them of U.S. defense commitments, to Mike Pence's comments at the Munich Security Conference, traditional Republican elites continue to push back publicly against Trump's reflexive hostility to U.S. alliances.

This conflict over America's role in the world is not limited to security issues. Trump's proposed budget bolsters military spending but cuts diplomacy and foreign aid. Such an approach to foreign policy is fundamentally Jacksonian in nature, but will be problematic for others, even former military leaders like Mattis, who once told a congressional committee, "If you don't fully fund the State Department, then I need to buy more ammunition."

Running parallel to this conflict, however, we also find a multisided struggle over how America should be fighting the War on Terror. For the Jacksonians, the focus is on more military might, particularly building up the campaign against the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) as Trump promised during the campaign. Many of the former military men are in favor of such troop increases, and regard the Obama administration as having been too cautious, particularly in the fight against ISIL.

At the same time, there is no agreement between the two groups on how to proceed after ISIL is defeated. While the grown-ups increasingly suggest that a long-term troop presence is necessary in Iraq and Syria for stabilization and peacekeeping, Trump's Jacksonians are far less likely to favor a nation-building strategy so similar to the one they disparaged in Iraq after the 2003 invasion. Nor is there agreement on how to deal with the Assad regime, despite last week's airstrikes.

The two groups also disagree strongly about how to label the problem of terrorism more broadly. Trump's inaugural address referenced the problem of "radical Islamic terrorism," a description previous administrations have hesitated to use because it risks antagonizing and demonizing Muslims more broadly. Trump's campaign promise to institute a "Muslim ban" on entry to the United States has come to at least partial fruition, with the administration's attempt to implement executive orders suspending travel from some Muslim-majority countries.

Bannon's cohort seek to link Islam to terrorism even more explicitly. Before his White House job, Bannon's films argued that the United States was at risk of losing its identity to "radical Islamism." The administration's more radical elements have been tied to Islamophobic groups like Frank Gaffney's Center for Security Policy, and have apparently considered designating the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist group.

Certainly, this approach has met with strong pushback from many of the grown-ups, not least for the logistical difficulties created by alienating the Muslim nations who support the War on Terror. Thus far, however, their impact has been minimal, with H.R. McMaster apparently failing to prevent Trump from using the phrase "radical Islamic terrorism" in his speech to Congress, and obtaining only a partial modification to the travel ban — the removal of Iraq.

The Ceasefire

The conflicts in the administration thus deal with some of the key questions in U.S. foreign policy: the extent of America's role in the world and the roots of the War on Terror. And just like the core issues at the heart of many civil wars, these disputes will be difficult, perhaps impossible, to resolve. Of the two possible outcomes in the administration's civil war — victory or a negotiated settlement — the latter is more likely.

Though most civil wars end in decisive military victory for one side or the other, it seems unlikely that any of the groups engaged in the foreign policy infighting will triumph. The struggle may certainly claim the heads of faction members, such as Mike Flynn or perhaps Steve Bannon. Yet neither Jihadis nor Jacksonians can fully triumph, for the simple reason that they lack sufficient governmental experience. Indeed, the addition of more status quo thinkers to the administration was in itself a tacit admission that Trump needed to draw from existing foreign policy elites simply to staff a bare minimum of appointed positions.

At the same time, widespread hopes that more traditional GOP foreign policy elites would mold Trump's foreign policy has not been borne out. Non-traditional advisors like Jared Kushner continue to have substantial input on key foreign policy decisions, and Trump's apparent unwillingness to appoint any sub-cabinet level foreign policy experts limits the size and reach of Washington's typical foreign policy elite. It remains unlikely that they will be able to disabuse Trump of his long-held personal antipathies in foreign affairs.

As a result, the future course of U.S. foreign policy is likely to deemphasize areas of disagreement between the groups, and focus on limited areas of agreement. Rather than seek to substantively alter the U.S. relationship with NATO, for example, Trump is likely to increase U.S. commitments to the fight against ISIL. Instead of seeking to improve U.S.-Russian relations, the administration will probably opt to dial up the pressure on Iran.

Yet, with no overarching agreement on U.S. strategic goals, such policies will also be short-term and tactical in nature. Indeed, the steps that the Trump administration has already taken in the Middle East — adding several thousand troops to Iraq and Syria, missile strikes on the Assad regime, loosening the rules of engagement, stepping up support for the Saudi-led war in Yemen — are all fundamentally short-sighted.

Increasing the pace of the fight against ISIL may be satisfying, but the White House appears to have no plan for post-conflict stabilization, or any mechanism for preventing America's fractious allies from fighting each other. Adding to the carnage in Yemen will likely strengthen al-Qaeda in the long-term. Meanwhile, loosening the rules of engagement will increase civilian casualties in Middle Eastern conflicts, making it harder for local governments to cooperate with the United States.

Ultimately, the disparate Trump administration factions are most likely to form temporary alliances on foreign policy problems where short-term escalation is popular, easy, and painless. But there is little hope of actually resolving any of America's foreign policy challenges. Their infighting is a recipe for escalation, and the creation of a four- or eight-year military quagmire with no clear endgame. A civil war indeed.

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