



Donald Trump's Hits And Misses In Foreign Policy

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Donald Trump has offered his foreign policy vision. It was a bit of a mishmash, but he is no Neoconservative and broke with pro-war Republican orthodoxy in important ways.

The speech, delivered last week in downtown Washington, was standard campaign fare, intended to demonstrate that the candidate was serious, and included some of the usual bland generalities.

Still, there was considerable good in the talk.

After the Cold War, he noted, "Logic was replaced with foolishness and arrogance, which led to one foreign policy disaster after another." Hard to argue with that. Moreover, said Trump, it was a mistake to believe that the U.S. could impose Western-style democracy on countries "that had no experience or interests" in the process.

Indeed, he noted that "the legacy of the Obama-Clinton interventions will be weakness, confusion and disarray, a mess." It actually is the Bush-Obama-Clinton interventions, but point taken. "Our actions in Iraq, Libya and Syria have helped unleash ISIS," Trump added.

Added Trump: "unlike other candidates for the presidency, war and aggression will not be my first instinct." Those are words not often spoken by Republicans. He also criticized the Iraq debacle, whose "biggest beneficiary has been Iran."

Further, complained Trump, "our allies are not paying their fair share." He promised to get out "of the nation-building business." He argued that Washington should cooperate with Russia.

But there was the bad in the talk as well.

In complaining about the cost of defending allies, Trump drew the wrong conclusion: "The countries we are defending must pay for the cost of this defense, and if not, the U.S. must be prepared to let these countries defend themselves." Washington should not hire out its military. Rather, foreign peoples should defend their own nations.

In a speech intended to highlight his unconventional thinking, he made the standard Republican claim that "our friends are beginning to think they can't depend on us." Like those nations in Asia, Europe, and the Middle East that Washington continues to defend at such high cost?

He complained about the “disastrous deal with Iran” without offering an alternative. Yet the agreement has pushed back Tehran’s ability to create nuclear weapons and intensified the internal struggle over Iran’s future.

“Our rivals no longer respect us,” complained Trump. “President Obama watches helplessly as North Korea” continues its nuclear developments. As did Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush. President Trump likely would find himself in the same situation.

Finally, there was more than a little ugly.

Trump overestimated Washington’s ability to force other nations to do its will: with America’s “economic power, we can rein in and we can get [the Chinese] to do what they have to do with North Korea.” It would make more sense to use diplomacy, which Trump elsewhere lauds, to address China’s concerns over a possible North Korean collapse than to threaten to wreck the relationship between the world’s two most important states. As I point out in Forbes, “Trump should recognize the likely reaction of a proud, nationalistic people whose country only recently escaped centuries of humiliation to an attempt by arrogant foreigners to dictate policy.”

Trump announced: “ISIS will be gone if I’m elected president. And they’ll be gone quickly. They will be gone very, very quickly.” Ironically, this is another instance of Washington doing someone else’s job: America’s allies and friends are the countries threatened by ISIS, so they should do the heavy lifting.

Moreover, Trump insisted that “we have to rebuild our military.” In fact, even after adjusting for inflation Obama’s cumulative military expenditures will exceed those of his predecessor. America accounts for roughly 40 percent of the globe’s military outlays because it needlessly defends Washington’s Asian, European, and Middle Eastern friends.

Donald Trump’s foreign policy sounds a lot like his domestic policy: inconsistent, ill-formed, incomplete. But still better than those of his main rivals. If he wins the GOP nomination, the presidential race might yield a genuine debate over foreign policy.

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