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## **Donald Trump Channels Hillary Clinton, Attacks Syria: From America First To America Last**

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Donald Trump spent the presidential campaign insisting that Washington's first duty was to protect the American people. His vision was inconsistent and incomplete, but still sensible enough to horrify Washington's bipartisan war party.

Almost exactly a year ago he gave a major address to the Center for the National Interest in which he criticized nation-building and especially the disastrous Iraq and Libya interventions: "After losing thousands of lives and spending trillions of dollars, we are in far worst shape in the Middle East than ever, ever before."

He also promised to step back from confrontation from Russia. "I believe an easing of tensions, and improved relations with Russia from a position of strength [not] only is possible, [but] absolutely possible. Common sense says this cycle, this horrible cycle of hostility must end and ideally will end soon," he explained.

He applied both principles to Syria. He insisted that the Islamic State was America's primary objective in Syria. He said President Barack Obama should not intervene even if Damascus crossed the latter's chemical weapons "red line." And candidate Trump urged cooperation with Moscow in Syria. He offered a radical but welcome departure from Obama administration policy. Until last week he and his appointees followed this line. For instance, on March 30 UN Ambassador Nikki Haley declared: "Our priority is not to focus on getting Assad out."

Candidate Trump went on to make a promise extraordinary for Washington, that "unlike other candidates for the presidency, war and aggression will not be my first instinct." Warrior wannabe Republican and Democratic leaders sniffed their disapproval, but he well captured the frustrations of the American people who do the paying and dying in America's many conflicts. Just last week he declared that "I'm not, and I don't want to be, the president of the world."

Alas, less than three months after taking office for President Trump has begun channeling Hillary Clinton on foreign policy. Despite almost six years of war and the deaths of several hundred thousand people in Syria, he apparently was not aware that the conflict had resulted in extraordinary human hardship. So after seeing what he called "horrible" photos of some of the

scores of dead from an apparent Syrian chemical attack the president ordered strikes on a Syrian military base. And that may not be all: his aides talked about taking further military action.

Secretary of State Rex Tillerson initially said “steps are under way” to develop a new international coalition to oust Assad: “it would seem that there would be no role for him to govern the Syrian people,” he announced last Thursday. Over the weekend, however, he backpedaled, insisting that the administration’s focus on the Islamic State was unchanged, since a political resolution would require “participation of the regime and the support of their allies.” He also expressed his hope “that we can work with Russia and use their influence to achieve areas of stabilization throughout Syria.”

In contrast, Ambassador Haley spewed fire and brimstone while seeming to push aside her nominal boss. Peace is impossible “as long as Assad remains in power,” she insisted: “we’ve got to go and make sure that we actually see a leader that will protect his people.” She allowed that “Getting Assad out is not the only priority”: The U.S. also has “to get out the Iranian influence,” which is necessary “for peace and stability in the area.”

Moreover, Haley insisted that Moscow and Tehran “now have to answer for” their support for the Assad regime. When it comes to sanctions against the two states nothing “is off the table.” She promised that the president “won’t stop here.” Indeed, if “he needs to do more, he will do more.” The administration will exercise “strong leadership,” whatever that means, she insisted.

National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster implausibly contended that there was no difference between the positions taken by Tillerson and Haley: “There has to be a degree of simultaneous activity, as well as sequencing the defeat of ISIS first.” He added: “the resolution of the conflict will entail both of the elements that you’re talking about.” In short, the U.S. must both destroy the Islamic state and overthrow Assad, but do so in the right order.

Critics of Donald Trump exhibited a strange new respect for him after he launched the missiles. He had acted “presidential,” said one. Apparently nothing wins acclaim in Washington like killing foreigners in the name of doing good. No matter the disastrous consequences of Washington’s oft-attempted global social engineering.

The war lobby also pushed back against Secretary Tillerson’s apparent retreat. For instance, the irrepressible Sen. Lindsey Graham, who has yet to find a war that he doesn’t want others to fight, claimed “regime change is now the policy of the Trump administration. That’s at least what I’ve heard.” The equally war-happy Sen. Marco Rubio criticized the secretary of state for focusing on ISIS. “You cannot have a stable Syria without jihadist elements on the ground with Bashar al-Assad in power.”

The ivory tower commentariat, too, went into full war cry. Its members are never so eloquent as when demanding that others go to war. Argued Briton Piers Morgan: Assad will “keep doing this until someone stops him. WHO will stop him?” Certainly not Morgan. That obviously is the American military’s job. But journalists and policy analysts will enthusiastically cheer on the sacrifice by U.S. personnel.

Candidate Donald Trump got Syria right. Nothing in the conflict warrants Washington’s involvement. Last week he declared that as president he now has “responsibility” for Syria.

Actually, he is responsible for America, the liberty, security, and prosperity of its people. And that requires staying out of unnecessary wars, like Syria.

Syria's fate has little impact on U.S. security. During the Cold War the regime, headed by Assad's father, was allied with the Soviet Union. After being defeated by Israel in the 1973 Yom Kippur War, Damascus retreated to a cold war with Israel. Syria meddled in neighboring Lebanon, but with little impact on anyone else. Despite Syria's friendship with Iran, the latter remained well behind the military capabilities of Saudi Arabia and its Sunni coalition.

Even if Syria mattered more it would not justify intervention by the U.S. Policymakers have turned military action into a first resort, but war is different in kind and not just in degree from other policy options. It should be reserved to protect America, which is not threatened by the Syrian civil war.

Today Syria is a wreck and has international significance primarily as a battlefield. Even if Iran and Russia are able to "save" Assad *filis*, the regime will be a ghost, a remnant of what it once was. Indeed, the Assad government is a costly investment: it is wasting its allies' lives and materiel while generating international hostility toward them. There's no reason for Washington to join the fight.

War advocates tend to stretch the concept of "vital" interests to nothingness. For instance, President Trump said it is in the "vital national security interest of the United States to prevent and deter the spread and use of deadly chemical weapons," even though they weren't going anywhere. In contrast to nuclear and biological weapons, chemical agents typically are not mass killers.

President Trump declared that "These heinous actions by the Assad regime cannot be tolerated." Chemical weapons are awful, but not obviously worse than bombs or even well-aimed bullets. Treating death by chemicals as so much worse than death by other weapons makes a moral mountain out of a policy molehill. The difference does not justify Washington joining the war.

Secretary Tillerson argued that the potential of insurgents grabbing chemical weapons posed an "existential" threat to America, but ISIS already is believed to possess them. Anyway, Tillerson's scenario is implausible at best: smuggling them in and using them would be extraordinarily difficult. Rep. Trent Franks declared "making it clear that innocent victims of terrorism and evil do have at least one friend in this world" is a "vital American interest," which, if true, means both nothing and everything are vital interests.

Of course, Syria is a humanitarian tragedy. But it is a civil war, not genocide. Most of the casualties have been combatants, not civilians. The regime may kill more prodigiously, but primarily as a result of its greater capability rather than lesser morality. While there undoubtedly are liberal, democratic insurgents, there is a surplus of bad guys on both sides.

Indeed, the conflict features a who's who of America's dubious friends, frenemies, adversaries, and enemies all at each other's throats: Assad government, Sunni jihadists and terrorists, Iranian-supported militias, Russian, Saudi, Qatari, and Turkish forces, Kurdish fighters, immoderate "moderates," and more. Last month Washington deployed U.S. forces to separate Turkish-backed and Kurdish forces, which had clashed. The most important difference among them for

Washington is that many of Assad's opponents are interested in killing Americans and other people outside of Syria, most notably the Islamic State and other jihadist groups.

And there should be no illusions about who would do the fighting if Washington jumped into the Syrian war. Noted Aaron David Miller and Richard Sokolsky of the Woodrow Wilson International Center and Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, respectively: "one of the more stubborn realities of the Syrian conflict is that America's Sunni Arab partners—with the exception of small Jordan and vulnerable Lebanon—have talked tough but done little in the way of absorbing refugees or contributing forces to the actual fight against ISIS."

The desire to end the suffering is laudable, but impractical. The U.S. has no simple means to bring liberal order out of brutal chaos. Air power alone is unlikely to defeat Assad: "boots on the ground," as the saying goes, would be necessary. And ousting Assad would not end the fighting. Instead, it would just set off a new combat round in a situation dramatically, even exponentially, more complicated than previous conflicts.

Moreover, given the debacles in Iraq and Libya, Washington could not simply walk away after defenestrating Assad. Imagine the ISIS flag rising over Damascus and angry victors slaughtering Alawites, Christians, and other religious minorities. Even in "victory" Washington would find a host of new tasks to perform: defeat radical forces, protect victimized minorities, create stable governance, eliminate Iranian and Russian influence, mediate between Turks and Kurds, and whatever other fantasies filled the minds of Washington's social engineers. The likelihood that the Trump administration could create stable democratic rule Syria is even less than the chance it could do so in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya.

Washington's humanitarian record is a bit threadbare. Its Mideast allies include Egypt, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, all of which have dubious human rights records. America's support for Riyadh's horrid war in Yemen makes Washington complicit in the death of thousands of civilians who have done nothing against the U.S. or its people. Consistency may be the hobgoblin of small minds, but it still matters in foreign policy, especially when the president of the United States reportedly is basing his decisions on casualty photos.

While there's no good reason for Washington to jump into the Syrian imbroglio, there are several powerful reasons to stay out. To start, the president has no legal authority to attack Syria—the post-9/11 congressional authorization obviously doesn't apply and Damascus has not attacked or threatened America or even an American ally. The Constitution places the decision to initiate hostilities with Congress, not the president. Indeed, candidate Trump urged President Barack Obama to get legislative authority before bombing Syria. In 2013 the former declared: "Obama needs Congressional approval."

War advocates ignore the obvious, that attacking Assad inevitably empowers the Islamic State and other radical Islamists. Many so-called moderates do not appear to be very moderate, and they have not demonstrated the ability to defeat Assad as well as assorted jihadist movements. Ironically, they have been targeted by Damascus because the prospect of Western support made them particularly dangerous to the Assad regime.

Moreover, moving toward war in Syria sets up a great power confrontation with Russia, the one nation with a nuclear force which allows it to go head-to-head against America. Sen. John McCain, perhaps the Senate's most belligerent member, dismissed the danger of such a clash: they "will not want a confrontation with the United States of America. And if they do, they will lose, because we are superior to them militarily."

However, with far more at stake, Moscow is willing to spend and risk far more. Last October candidate Trump warned against starting "a shooting war in Syria, in conflict with a nuclear-armed Russia that could very well lead to World War III." Additionally, the Putin government can help advance or hinder U.S. policy objectives in Europe, Afghanistan, Iran, and North Korea. One need not like Vladimir Putin to realize the importance of having a working relationship with its government, which, despite its aggressiveness on Europe's periphery, nowhere threatens fundamental American security interests.

Confronting Tehran in Syria undercuts the possibility of liberalization in Iran. Along with discouraging the Islamic republic from developing nuclear weapons, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or nuclear accord, increased the likelihood of internal political change. Expanding economic opportunities for younger Iranians gives them a greater incentive to fight for political change. Unfortunately, continuing U.S. restrictions have impeded such a transformation. Creating a security crisis would make positive change even less likely. Having a friendly regime in Damascus matters far more to neighboring Tehran than distant America, so the clerical regime is willing to sacrifice much more than Washington to "win" in Syria.

Finally, the president's potential diversion back into the Middle East likely is causing high-fives all over Beijing. President Trump came into office challenging the People's Republic of China on a range of issues. He's already appeared to back down and move toward a more normal relationship. But Chinese President Xi Jinping probably never imagined even in his fondest dreams that yet another Washington administration would rush toward into yet another no-win Mideast war—and so early after taking office.

President Trump seems to know better than to entangle America another Middle Eastern imbroglio. After being criticized for his newly discovered militarist instincts, he proclaimed: "We are not going into Syria." Three years ago he opposed demands that President Barack Obama bomb the same regime for the use of the same weapons. But after seeing "horrible" photos, he launched a barrage of cruise missiles. On that basis, the president easily could end up taking America into even more wars in coming years.

Syria is a human tragedy of extraordinary proportions. But normally the U.S. "goes not abroad in search of monsters to destroy," proclaimed Secretary of State John Quincy Adams a century ago. Sometimes war is necessary. But only very rarely. Washington's overriding duty is to safeguard America, not remake the world. That principle is only likely to grow more important over time.

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