



Trump Should Follow His Instincts and Get Out of Syria

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On Friday, April 13th, President Trump ordered a second round of missile strikes on Syria, in conjunction with France and Great Britain, as a response to further allegations of chemical weapons use by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. This operation comes almost exactly one year after 2017 strikes for the same reasons.

During a recent infrastructure event in Cleveland, Trump surprised the media and many in his administration by an off-handed remark that the “U.S. would be coming out of Syria very soon.” *The Washington Post* then reported that Trump officially asked for plans to withdraw troops, but without a specific timetable. He has apparently been mulling this idea over for weeks, much to the chagrin of military leaders and advisors, and members of Congress. Republican Senator Lindsey Graham said pulling out of Syria would be the “single worst decision” he could make. Commanders on the ground are also concerned about the administration's waning support for their mission.

But the allegations of more chemical weapons use changed the calculus. UN Ambassador Nikki Haley now says that American troops would not be coming home until the U.S. can ensure further deterrence of chemical weapons use by the Assad regime, the Islamic State is defeated, and when there is a “good vantage point” to see what Iran is up to. Most of the time, I would welcome Trump deferring to experts on policy issues, as he has shown little interest in learning anything about them. But with regards to Syria, President Trump should heed the rhetoric of candidate Trump—even if his campaign rhetoric was largely insincere—and pull out American forces now.

The case for exiting Syria is straightforward. ISIS is largely defeated, and there is very little that America can do to ensure a good outcome in the Syrian Civil War. The rebels, even with our support, have been unable to topple Bashar al-Assad. In *The National Interest*, authors Denis Dragovic and Richard Iron have written that “the likelihood of stabilizing Syria is low” because of the “limited capacity of the international community, the conflicting geopolitical interests, and the depth of animosity among people on the ground.”

Further, as Cato Institute Senior Fellow Doug Bandow argues, “trying to sort out a complex civil war in which there are multiple forces ranging from dubious to awful is a task beyond the

abilities” of the United States to handle. U.S. officials are delusional to think they can “can transcend history, religion, ethnicity, geography, culture, ideology and more to inaugurate peace on earth. Alas, that didn’t happen after previous intervention[s]...Outsiders can’t fix Syria.”

Despite this grim reality, the Pentagon insists the U.S. should remain involved in the conflict. For politicians and the general public, the military’s positions are usually considered beyond reproach because of people’s veneration for the institution and those who serve in it. But the Pentagon is made up of individuals who suffer from many of the same internal biases and motivations of which we are all subjected, and sometimes these biases can lead to poor decisions.

Two things that motivate the Pentagon and other elite foreign policymakers in the U.S. are status and prestige, and our reputation for asserting global power, according to John Glaser, also of the Cato Institute. In the Spring 2018 issue of *The Washington Quarterly*, Glaser argues these ideas have been “the most prevalent drivers of U.S. foreign policy for decades, with frequent references to the idea of America as the world’s sole superpower, the leading state, and the indispensable nation.” There are benefits to major power status, but it can also lead to “costly policies for the sake of peripheral, or even imaginary, interests. States trying to avoid perceived losses in status are often driven to pursue risk-averse strategies and even to become mired in failing ventures.”

This emphasis on status and prestige cause foreign policymakers to fall prey to what Nobel Prize-winning economist and social theorist Friedrich Hayek called “the fatal conceit.” Hayek originally applied his concept to central economic planners and those who assume “man is able to shape the world around him according to his wishes.” Political economists Christopher Coyne and Rachel Mathers have applied this principle to foreign interventions.

Believing that America has a role as the primary player on the world stage leads to a confidence that we can bend the world in any way we want, regardless of constraints. Despite having good intentions, the underlying assumption at play, according to Coyne and Mathers, is “intelligent and benevolent planners can design a plan that, if implemented properly, will yield an outcome preferable to the status quo.” But social problems in foreign countries are not problems where “success is mainly a technological matter, directly dependent on the amount of effort and resources invested in planning as well as on the execution of the plan.”

The U.S. has tried for almost two decades now to build a viable central state in Afghanistan, to no avail. We also tried to import democracy to Iraq with disastrous consequences. To think that we can have any meaningful impact in Syria is wishful thinking, and the security concerns there do not justify an American military presence.

I am under no illusion that Trump is sincerely interested in anti-intervention, despite his campaign rhetoric on this issue. Nonetheless, whatever is guiding his thinking on Syria, he should follow it. After decades of an interventionist status quo, perhaps it is time to try something different.