



What's the Trump Doctrine? Depends who you ask

February 22, 2019

On Dec. 19, President Donald Trump announced one of his most consequential foreign policy decisions: the rapid withdrawal of US troops from Syria. The snap decision ultimately prompted the departure of his well-regarded Secretary of Defense, Jim Mattis, and continues to confound lawmakers and policy experts in Washington.

In the days surrounding that announcement, even those closest to the President couldn't get a straight story, as Trump told three different advisers three different things about his plans.

First, he assured Sen. Rand Paul, an advocate for immediate withdrawal, that the Kentucky Republican would be thrilled with the upcoming announcement to pull troops out quickly. Then, after announcing that troops would be leaving Syria within 30 days, Trump calmed Sen. Lindsey Graham, a consistent voice for engagement in the Middle East, telling him that the move would not be so sudden. Finally, Trump gave his hawkish national security adviser John Bolton permission to tell allies in the region the US would withdraw only if certain conditions on the ground were met.

On Feb. 21, more than 60 days after the initial withdrawal announcement, White House press secretary Sarah Sanders confirmed the administration had reached some kind of consensus position. "A small peace keeping group of about 200 will remain in Syria for period of time," she said in a statement.

The shifting message on Syria is a reminder that more than two years into his presidency, Trump lacks a cohesive foreign policy doctrine. Beyond being generally suspicious of international alliances and free trade, according to those who work closely with him, Trump has no well-defined worldview of his own; nor has he surrounded himself with a core group of like-minded advisers. His trio of generals are gone. Former Defense Secretary James Mattis, chief of staff John Kelly and national security adviser H.R. McMaster formed what many around Washington thought of as guardrails around the President, keeping him from acting on some of his more extreme impulses.

In their absence, Trump has been more free to rely on his own foreign-policy instincts. It's also created an opening for a small group of advisers. Interviews with more than a dozen current and former White House officials, foreign policy and national security advisers, and congressional aides describe a chaotic free-for-all where a handful of administration officials and GOP lawmakers compete for influence.

The four main actors represent different ideologies and approaches to global affairs and national security: Rand Paul, the isolationist; John Bolton, the hawk; Mike Pompeo, the Trump loyalist; and Lindsey Graham, the interventionist.

The result is a policy that is at times at odds with itself. Trump tacks between pronouncements of isolationism and actions of intervention, between threats of war and promises of accord, between a build-up of military spending and a withdrawal of military forces.

As the President and administration officials head to Vietnam next week for a high-stakes summit with North Korea, Trump's decision making will likely continue to be shaped by this mix of disparate advice and second guessing from his foreign policy kitchen cabinet.

Rand Paul vs. John Bolton

The battle for influence over Trump's foreign policy is perhaps most acutely viewed through the rivalry between Rand Paul and John Bolton. The two men are diametrically opposed to each other— Paul an unabashed isolationist, Bolton the consummate hawk. Both are viewed skeptically by the establishment of their party as extremists and ideologues. And yet both have found their respective places in Trump's foreign-policy kitchen cabinet, Paul appealing to Trump's isolationist tendencies, and Bolton working to thwart those efforts.

So far, it's been a pitched battle. Despite his proclamation of a quick withdrawal from Syria, Bolton has worked to slow the removal of troops and build alliances around his cause. Still, Paul has emerged as a formidable force. Allies and critics agree that he has gained an inordinate amount of influence over Trump's foreign policy recently and is as responsible as anyone for his push toward withdrawal these past few months.

Trump and Paul have some similarities. They're both outsiders, separate from the establishment wing of the GOP. They also share the view that the US is overextended militarily and has little to show for nearly two decades of war in the Middle East. Several GOP hawks admit that on the questions of Syria, Afghanistan, and the broader issue of American intervention in the Middle East, Trump and Paul are closer than many would prefer.

"Rand Paul has an undue amount of influence," says Dan Crenshaw, a freshman Republican House member from Texas. Asked who has the president's ear on Afghanistan, Adam Kinzinger, a GOP House member from Illinois, doesn't hesitate. "Rand Paul," he says. Another senior GOP lawmaker who frequently attends meetings with Trump puts it more bluntly: "Rand Paul is living in Trump's brain rent-free."

Through a spokesman, Paul declined to speak to CNN.

Paul speaks with Trump frequently, on the phone, in person, and on the golf course. In all of these conversations, say people familiar with them, Paul remains laser-focused on getting troops out of Syria and Afghanistan.

Bolton on the other hand isn't personally close with Trump. They don't golf together. Those who know him say Bolton is not a backslapper. Trump has even on occasion referred to his national security adviser as "Mike Bolton."

Still, what Bolton lacks in a personal rapport with Trump he makes up for in experience and the all-important commodity in Washington: proximity to the President. As a longtime DC operator with stints in every Republican administration since Ronald Reagan's, Bolton has a deep appreciation for the mechanisms of government and politics. "I have never met anybody who understands process more than John Bolton," says Mark Groombridge, a scholar at the libertarian Cato Institute and a former adviser to Bolton.

That was evident in a memo that Bolton circulated on Christmas Eve to the Cabinet as an attempt to undercut Paul's push for a speedy Syria withdrawal.

The memo described a strategy by which American troops could be replaced by Turkish ones. It also reiterated the administration's objective of eliminating ISIS from its base in Syria and Iraq. The plan drew skeptical responses from the Pentagon but helped lay the groundwork for what came next: a shift from Trump on how quickly troops would be withdrawn. The next week, with the President's blessing, Bolton was in the Middle East informing allies that certain conditions would have to be met before troops would leave.

Bolton also manages the President from the outside. He regularly talks with like-minded Republicans on Capitol Hill, encouraging them to meet with Trump as a way to counteract the influence of Paul. There's been an uptick in recent months of those meetings, from hawks in both the House and the Senate.

Sources close to the White House say that while Paul has benefited from having direct access to the President, his voice only carries so much weight as he often stands alone.

Bolton has also been able to win favor with Trump by concentrating on issues and areas not directly in Trump's gaze—or within Paul's wheelhouse. Groombridge says Bolton helped educate Trump on the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty, which the President knew nothing about before taking office. Bolton has long considered in the INF treaty "obsolete" and has advocated withdrawing from it for years. The administration did exactly that on Feb. 1.

"This guy knows what he's doing," says a Democratic Hill source. "It doesn't mean we agree with him, but he's an actual player who is strategic in how he operates."

"Ambassador Bolton and the National Security Council staff coordinate closely with various agencies to provide President Trump with thoughtful policy options, allowing the President to make decisions on our nation's security and pursue his foreign policy agenda," NSC spokesman Garrett Marquis told CNN.

The Bolton-Paul dynamic is also colored by years of mutual animosity that pre-dates Trump. In 2014, Bolton publicly blasted Paul as "incoherent" and foolish when the Kentucky Republican argued against containment of Iran's nuclear program. "There's an old saying that says, better to remain silent and have all the world think you a fool than to open your mouth and prove it," Bolton said of Paul on the Fox Business Network in 2014.

In 2015, Bolton actively fund-raised against Paul through his organization, the Foundation for American Security and Freedom, which ran ads critical of Paul for the senator's support for the Iran nuclear deal.

Meanwhile, Paul has publicly and privately objected to Bolton's employment within the Trump administration. "I'll do whatever it takes to stop someone like John Bolton being secretary of state," Paul told Politico just days after the 2016 election. That animus hasn't abated since Bolton entered the White House, with allies of Paul pointing to the national security adviser as a leader of the internal resistance to the withdrawal agenda.

Pompeo in the middle

In the middle of all this is Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, who by many accounts enjoys the closest relationship of any adviser to Trump. The two often eat lunch together in the White House and enjoy sharing bawdy jokes, according to a source with knowledge of their relationship. "He actually likes to spend time with him and thinks Pompeo is fun," says the source.

The tight relationship stems from the earliest days of the administration, when Pompeo, then the director of the CIA, personally delivered the daily intelligence briefing to the president inside the Oval Office. Pompeo was for months rumored to be in line for the job before his predecessor Rex Tillerson was fired last March.

Pompeo isn't just friendly with Trump, he's intensely loyal to him. Both publicly and privately, he has reacted angrily to criticisms of Trump's policies, at one point slamming his fists in frustration at a critical question from a journalist. Unfailingly toeing the administration line has helped Pompeo maintain his proximity to Trump.

He's also the rare official who has mastered the art of delivering bad news to Trump and disagreeing with him. "Mike can tell the president, 'This is really bad, it doesn't look good, but this what I'm gonna say,'" says a second source familiar with their conversations. "He knows how to disagree. He can disagree without the president feeling like he's trashing him."

Unlike Bolton, Pompeo has avoided becoming a target of Paul, who has no incentive to trash the President's closest adviser. And for an operator like Bolton, Pompeo has served as a useful ally, reinforcing the arguments where the secretary agrees with the national security adviser, from Venezuela to Syria. Smartly, Bolton hasn't tried to undercut or outmaneuver Pompeo. "I think Bolton realizes that Mike just has a better line to the President. And that's a powerful thing," says the source familiar with their conversations.

Pompeo's dominance is particularly evident on areas where Bolton gets ahead of the administration. Bolton's praise for the Libya model for denuclearization—whereby dictator Moammar Gadhafi abandoned his own nuclear program, only to have U.S.-backed rebels depose and kill him a few years later—shortly before last year's summit with North Korea's Kim Jong-un angered Trump. After that, Pompeo encouraged the President to exclude Bolton from a high-profile Oval Office meeting with top North Korean diplomat Kim Yong Chol.

The State Department did not respond to a request for comment.

Lindsay the Freelancer

Then there's Republican Senator Lindsey Graham, who has emerged as something of a freelancer. Once a harsh critic who said Trump was "crazy" and "unfit to be president," Graham has become a staunch ally of the President and the administration. They've also become close friends. As with Pompeo, Trump enjoys Graham's sense of humor, and like Paul, the two play golf together.

That personal connection, along with Graham's high-profile defense of the administration on everything from judicial nominees to a border wall, keeps Graham in the President's good graces.

"Who are his two best friends in the Senate? Lindsay Graham and Rand Paul. There couldn't be two more different people to listen to on foreign policy," says Jay Carafano of the Heritage Foundation and a former Trump transition official.

If Trump likes to be told he's right, he also fears being blamed for being wrong, and Graham has cast himself as the President's helpful guide through avoiding unintended consequences. The senator from South Carolina says Trump appreciates his knowledge and experience on Middle East policy.

"I think he values the fact I've been there a lot, that I was a pretty ferocious critic of Obama, and that the things that I predicted about Iraq came true," Graham tells CNN.

Graham, who speaks frequently with Bolton, has taken advantage of his standing to encourage the President to think farther ahead. Instead of trying to change Trump's mind on withdrawal from Syria, for instance. Graham says he has praised the president for prompting a conversation about the future of the region.

"You know, ending the endless war is the goal, but you've got to have a post-caliphate strategy," he says, describing his conversations with Trump. "I said, 'To your credit, Mr. President, you're pushing us to think about a strategy post-caliphate, and we haven't really done that.'"

Next, North Korea

For all its pronouncements of transformative policy changes, perhaps the biggest byproduct of this chaotic kitchen cabinet is stagnation. Consider the upcoming second summit between the President and Kim Jong-un of North Korea, happening next week in Vietnam.

Since last June's summit between the two leaders in Singapore, Trump has expressed optimism for reaching an agreement on nuclear weapons with the North Koreans, going so far as to say he and Kim "fell in love." The President is already raising expectations for the summit, even as the administration's intelligence chiefs testified in late January that Kim's regime "is unlikely to completely give up its nuclear weapons and production capability."

The jockeying within the kitchen cabinet is already afoot, and the views are as disparate as always. Lindsey Graham has in recent months been publicly critical of the President's more

diplomatic rhetoric toward Kim, saying in October that “this love crap needs to stop” and urging Trump to be more aggressive with Kim before the summit. Rand Paul has encouraged Trump to seek diplomacy with Kim and last June blasted Graham as a “danger to the country” for floating the idea of authorizing military force against North Korea if talks broke down.

Meanwhile, CNN is reporting that John Bolton, who has remained highly skeptical of any meaningful agreement with Kim, is traveling to Asia ahead of the summit. This, even as Mike Pompeo continues to be the administration’s lead figure—and staunchest advocate for—negotiations with North Korea.

The President will no doubt be listening to all of them.