

The logo for Epoch Times, featuring the words "EPOCH" and "TIMES" stacked vertically in a white, serif font against a dark blue square background.

## **Exit From Syria Portends New Phase for Trump's 'America First' Foreign Policy**

Ivan Pentchoukov

December 27, 2018

President Donald Trump caught all of Washington by surprise on Dec. 19 by doing what he promised to do on the campaign trail and foreshadowed this August. Having virtually defeated the ISIS terrorist group in Syria, he ordered U.S. troops out of the region.

Within hours, outrage poured in from Democrats and Republicans. News reports painted a picture of how withdrawal from this strip of desert in the Middle East would lead to death and destruction, how America had abandoned its allies, and how the maneuver was nothing short of surrender to Russia and Iran.

Relevant factors underlying America's ground presence in Syria were lost amid the hype and outrage. Key among them is why our troops were deployed there to begin with. Defeating ISIS was the original mission and remains the only justification under which the deployment is constitutional under the 9/11-era Authorization for Use of Military Force Against Terrorists Act.

Doing what one promised and abiding by the Constitution can cause a ruckus in Washington. Some Americans voted for Trump to do just that. But many more voted for a man who promised to put America first at home and abroad.

Trump has boldly delivered on that promise daily since coming to Washington. The exit signifies a new stage in the rollout of the "America First" agenda, extending it, for the first time, to how the White House deals with military engagements around the world.

"I won an election, said to be one of the greatest of all time, based on getting out of endless & costly foreign wars & also based on Strong Borders which will keep our Country safe. We fight for the borders of other countries, but we won't fight for the borders of our own!" Trump wrote on [Twitter on Dec. 22](#).

The United States has spent \$6 trillion on post-9/11 wars in the Middle East, according to the Watson Institute of International and Public Affairs ([pdf](#)). Trump is not alone in viewing that investment as ill-advised. Less than half of a percent of the \$6 trillion would be enough to build the wall on the southern border, using an April 2017 Homeland Security [cost estimate](#) of \$21.6

billion. The \$45 billion price tag for America's presence in Afghanistan this year would be enough to build the barrier twice.

War hawks may argue that pulling the military out of Syria is counter to America's interests because it may lead to chaos in the region and create the conditions for the reemergence of ISIS.

"That's exactly the flawed argument hawks employed to criticize the 2011 withdrawal from Iraq. Sure, it left a vacuum in which ISIS emerged. But ISIS itself is a product of the U.S. invasion of Iraq," wrote John Glaser, director of foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute.

"And our presence in Syria could very well be creating comparable unintended consequences, instead of preventing them."

Whether the exit is a significant boon to Russia, a country with a gross domestic product smaller than that of Texas, is arguable. Moscow, with its single, dilapidated aircraft carrier and a military budget 14 times smaller than that of the United States, has resorted to opportunism and disruption.

Meanwhile, America's biggest adversary, China, has spent almost nothing in the Middle East while amassing a giant, technologically advanced fighting force. Any cost cutting in the Middle East strengthens Washington's posture against Beijing.

The withdrawal from Syria also will be popular with voters, most of whom have grown weary of endless wars. Most Americans surveyed last year believed the war in Syria is not in the national interest, according to a survey by Quinnipiac University.

In April, when Trump began discussing a pullout with his staff, nearly half of Americans surveyed said the best way to handle the Syrian crisis was to leave it alone, according to a poll by Rasmussen Reports.

The exit from Syria is likely the first of many moves by Trump to shift the global military theater with American interests in mind. Sources in the administration told The Wall Street Journal that Trump has also ordered a complete withdrawal from Afghanistan, with 7,000 of the 14,000 troops there scheduled to return home over the next several weeks, a surprise gift for the families of those who return in time for Christmas.

"It's an incredibly bold maneuver," Sen. Rand Paul (R-Ky.) said of the exit from Syria. "All of the naysayers in Washington will be against him. But, guess what? If you ask the American people, this is why President Trump won the election."