



Syria exposes the core feature of Trump's foreign policy: contradiction

Zack Beauchamp

April 17, 2018

Two weeks ago, President Donald Trump was talking about withdrawing US troops from Syria, telling reporters at an April 3 press conference that “it’s time to come back home.” Yet this Friday, he ordered one of the biggest single US military strikes on Syrian targets — a bombing raid that hit three of Bashar al-Assad’s chemical weapons facilities — and vowed to “sustain this response until the Syrian regime stops its use of prohibited chemical agents.”

These proposals are coming from completely different places. It’s literally possible to remove the US ground troops who are in Syria to fight ISIS while continuing to bomb Assad-related targets from the air, but the two approaches reflect contradictory impulses to somehow end US military involvement in Syria while simultaneously threatening to bomb the country into the indefinite future. Trump’s first comments suggest the US will be heading for the exits; the second that the US is always a single chemical attack away from getting pulled in deeper.

This isn’t the only major foreign policy issue on which Trump has sent contradictory messages — in the past week alone.

On Sunday, Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley publicly announced that the US would impose new sanctions on Russia, only to be overruled by the president; the sanctions are still in limbo. On Monday, Trump sent a tweet blasting China for keeping its currency artificially cheap to boost exports — contradicting his own announcement just a few months ago that China was not a currency manipulator.

One thing foreign policy watchers love to do, especially with new presidents, is identify a capital-d Doctrine — a coherent set of ideas that defines this president’s approach to the world. The Trump administration, as the past week laid bare, has defied any such analysis — and will likely continue to do so for the foreseeable future.

While the president has some fairly consistent ideas — Russia should be our friend, global trade rules are unfair to the US — the process of translating those ideas into actual policy is broken. What ends up coming out isn’t a consistent “America First” foreign policy; it’s a mishmash of approaches that differ based not on an overall worldview but rather on a combination of bureaucratic politicking and the president’s own moods.

That means the Trump Doctrine, such as it is, can be summed up in a single phrase: contradiction.

Why Trump's foreign policy is different from all other foreign policies

In a perceptive essay for the academic blog LGM, Georgetown political scientist Dan Nexon argues against something he calls “analytical normalization” of the current White House. He defines this as “the act of explaining and assessing Trump’s presidency as if we were dealing with a typical president and a typical administration.”

Trump, Nexon argues, approaches the world in a way that’s fundamentally different than past presidents. He “acts impulsively, shifts his positions on a whim, lies about seemingly anything and everything, and sometimes deploys rhetoric radically detached from his policies.”

As a result, the normal signs we look to to understand a president’s foreign policy — reading White House strategy documents and parsing presidential statements with an eye toward figuring out an underlying coherent set of ideas — tend not to be a good guide to figuring out what Trump will actually try to do.

“Many of our post-war presidents suffered from deep dysfunctions of one kind or another,” Nexon writes. “[But] evaluating Trump foreign policy requires different guidelines than those that Beltway pundits, foreign-policy analysts, and reporters reflexively turn to.”

That means it’s a mistake to try to find a coherent ideological explanation for Trump’s Syria policies. The better approach is to examine the president’s own contradictory instincts and the strange relationship he has with his advisers.

It’s not that Trump has absolutely no ideas about foreign policy. He does. He has a strong sense that, for example, foreign civil wars aren’t America’s problems. But some of his other impulses, like his visceral emotional reaction to photographs of gassed Syrian children, push him in opposite directions on the exact same policy issue. The result is the kind of public ping-ponging that you saw in the past two weeks of Syria debates.

“There are clearly competing impulses within Trump’s foreign policy, between wanting to appear tough, which he defines as the use of force, but not seeming to repeat the errors of his predecessors, [meaning] foreign intervention that threatens to draw the US into still more open-ended conflicts,” says Christopher Preble, vice president for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute.

The second big reason for the administration’s policy incoherence is the fact that his top advisers have wildly varying beliefs and policy preferences and come from vastly different backgrounds.

The last time Trump was debating how to punish Syria for a chemical attack, in April 2017, the main players were senior White House strategist Steve Bannon, who opposed any strike, and National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster, who favored one.

This time around, there was a different divide — in terms of both the people involved, as Bannon and McMaster are both gone, and the valence of the options under discussion. One camp, led by

Defense Secretary Jim Mattis, wanted a bombing that remained limited but was somewhat more aggressive than the last one (essentially, what ended up happening). New National Security Adviser John Bolton favored a much more hawkish option: a “ruinous” strike on Assad’s entire military infrastructure.

The high level of staff turnover, as well as the sharply divergent worldviews among the foreign policy principals, pushes the president in all sorts of different directions. This is especially true given his demonstrably limited interest in wonky, detail-oriented policy thinking, as this leaves a lot of the specific policy development to Cabinet members and their staff. So Mattis, a Russia hawk, can send several hundred US troops to Poland on a NATO mission specifically designed to challenge Russia even as the president is talking about how he wants to improve US-Russia relations.

The Contradiction Doctrine reigns.

Trump’s foreign policy has a Twitter problem

All this dysfunction would be bad enough on its own. But to make matters more confusing, it all plays out in public.

US government statements are, in and of themselves, an important foreign policy tool. They’re a vital means of signaling the intent behind a policy to foreign governments, which is really important if the policy is designed to get the foreign government to change its behavior. If Washington wants to use force to deter the Syrian government from using chemical weapons, for example, a presidential administration of either party needs to send a crystal-clear message about the conditions under which Syria could trigger a US attack.

For this reason, past administrations have tried really hard to send a consistent and clear message about their approach.

“The [US government] used to go to great lengths to craft messages that persuaded and informed,” says Paul Musgrave, a scholar of American foreign policy at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. “Even Nixon and Kissinger wrote the ‘State of the World’ volumes that explained (much of) their ideas in great length.”

But this president just doesn’t work like that. Trump will, during public appearances, often say whatever comes to his mind — heedless of whether this contradicts something his aides said. He seems to get a lot of information from *Fox & Friends* and isn’t shy about repeating what he hears there.

And then there’s the fact that no one seems capable of cutting off his Twitter account, which he seems to air largely unfiltered thoughts. “The Trump administration’s statements of doctrines inhabit a different plane of existence than the president’s account,” as Musgrave puts it.

This isn’t just a matter of bad PR. It actively serves to *create* a contradictory foreign policy, because so much of foreign policy is sending a clear signal to foreign governments about your intentions. When Trump says something that contradicts his own policy, or something his aides

say, that American foreign policy can be concretely said to be contradicting itself. The country isn't speaking with one voice.

And this happens quite a lot, largely owing to Trump's own management style.

Some presidents, like Barack Obama, insist on disciplined and centralized public messaging from his deputies, which occasionally sparks controversy if there prove to be inaccuracies or exaggerations in that PR onslaught. Trump is kind of the opposite extreme, doing little to corral his top deputies. So Cabinet members end up saying things in public that don't reflect the president's considered judgment, leading to an even greater level of incoherence.

That's what happened with Russia sanctions this weekend. Ambassador Haley appeared on a Sunday news program and announced a raft of new sanctions Trump apparently hadn't fully approved. The president got mad, leading to an embarrassing and confusing walkback that spanned several days; on Tuesday, National Economic Council Director Larry Kudlow blamed the whole thing on Haley's "momentary confusion."

This is particularly notable because Haley has a reputation for being one of the more careful members of the Trump administration, someone who frequently checks in with the president to make sure she doesn't get out in front of him. If it can happen to Haley, it can happen to anyone.

We don't yet know what the consequences of this Contradiction Doctrine will be; we've never seen anything like it in a modern White House. But one can't escape the feeling that it will lead nowhere good.