

DAILY BULLETIN

Will Trump end the endless wars?

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Donald Trump made headlines in 2016 when he stood on a debate stage with 16 other Republican candidates and called the war in Iraq “a horrible mistake.” More recently Trump decried America’s need to exit “endless wars” when he tweeted that the United States would withdraw 2,000 American troops from Syria.

But despite Trump’s rhetoric, the reality is that Trump has done very little to pull the United States out of its endless wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria or elsewhere. His failure to do so tells us something about Trump’s preference for stagecraft over statecraft, but also about the powerful inertia of American foreign policy and the politics of national security.

Trump’s various attempts to exit endless wars have all followed a similar pattern. First, Trump tweets or tells the press that he plans to withdraw American troops, usually without consulting with his own advisers or putting in place an implementation plan.

Then, in the wake of Trump’s announcements, the Washington foreign policy establishment — and sometimes public opinion — reacts negatively to his announcement. Foreign policy experts and members of Congress take to the media to complain that any withdrawal would be a sign of weakness, would betray our allies and partners, and would lead to horrific consequences for America’s national security.

Meanwhile, Trump’s advisers rush about behind the scenes madly trying to convince him to change course. This was certainly the case when Trump got out ahead of his special envoy to Afghanistan to declare a withdrawal in the midst of tense negotiations with the Taliban. And Trump in December 2018 abruptly called for a withdrawal from Syria, only to have that order entirely reversed by the bureaucracy after James Mattis, the secretary of defense at the time, resigned in protest.

After the pressure ratchets up, Trump eventually caves to his advisers and to political pressure and either drops his effort to withdraw troops or waters it down enough to appease them.

And then finally, as we are seeing now with Syria, after a period of time Trump tries again, and the cycle repeats itself.

And those are just the cases where Trump has actually tried to minimize the American military footprint abroad. It’s also important to realize that he has expanded that footprint in several places. He ordered a surge of roughly 4,000 troops to Afghanistan. In his first two years in office, he quadrupled the number of boots on the ground in Syria and increased the overall U.S. military presence in the Middle East by more than 30 percent. He did this all while loosening the rules of engagement across numerous battlefields to enable a widened bombing campaign in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and beyond. And on Iran, Trump has adopted the most hawkish posture imaginable by essentially putting Washington and Tehran on a collision course, while stopping short of initiating a new war there.

Given all this sound and fury, it is fair to ask what Trump’s posturing on endless wars really signifies. If Trump truly believed in the importance of ending American military involvement overseas, he could have

overridden his advisers on the speed and shape of withdrawals from Syria, Afghanistan, and elsewhere. And he certainly didn't need to expand the war on terror in other places.

A better explanation starts with Trump's desire to pander to his nationalist base of America Trump has a dark gift for orchestrating the media's agenda to suit his political needs. He can use them to distract Americans from other topics he finds less politically palatable, like the Russia investigation and now the impeachment investigation.

Another important element of Trump's failure to end the endless wars, however, rests with the foreign policy establishment, or what President Obama called "the Blob." Inside Washington, D.C. remains a strong bipartisan consensus among policymakers and political leaders that the United States is the indispensable nation, and that the frequent use of American military force is required to maintain international security as well as Washington's influence over the rest of the world.

To the extent that Trump wants to extricate the United States from unnecessary military entanglements, he has the right instincts. But his inability to properly manage the policy process, or even unite his own cabinet around a clear strategy, means none of these impulses actually get implemented into policy. To properly withdraw, the United States will have to apply skillful diplomacy, make politically difficult concessions and accept a certain amount of risk during the transition.

In the chaotic and disorganized Trump administration, this seems nearly impossible. But Trump's bungling of the process should not dissuade Democrats and even other Republicans from acting to end endless wars. Trump may be giving restraint a bad name, but it is still the right policy.

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