

Trump owns these quagmires: Despite being skeptical about foreign entanglements, he's getting America bogged down overseas

A. Trevor Thrall and Erik Goepner

December 1, 2017

As North Korea's nuclear weapons continue to dominate the headlines, President Trump has quietly sunk the United States ever more deeply into a series of foreign policy quagmires. In Syria, Yemen, Afghanistan, Iraq and Somalia, the United States is trying to influence the course of civil conflicts that have nothing to do with the United States and little to no impact on America's national security.

None of these situations will end soon, nor will any of them end well for the United States. That this is happening with a new commander-in-chief who as a candidate urged America to get smart about foreign engagements is ironic but hardly surprising.

The "quagmire strategy," as we'll call it, has four main elements.

First, the White House embroils the United States in a civil conflict with no end in sight and often without any "good guys" to support.

Second, leaders define success in political terms that America has neither the power nor the willpower to achieve.

Third, the U.S. uses military force and military aid which destabilizes the nation, amplifies the conflict, and fuels higher levels of terrorism.

Finally, political leaders complain that America cannot leave because the conflict has not ended and other intractable problems, like terrorism, have grown.

The administration's announcement that it will keep troops in Syria in order to influence future political settlements represents the most recent evidence of Trump's pursuit of the quagmire strategy. This strategy makes little sense given the fact that Bashar Assad, supported by Russia and Iran, has only grown stronger. It makes even less sense now that the Islamic State — the initial reason for being there at all — has been sent fleeing.

Afghanistan provides another example. Despite his initial qualms, Trump decided to surge 5,000 more troops into Afghanistan, bringing the total to 14,000 alongside 25,000 or so civilian contractors.

Ostensibly designed to increase pressure on the Taliban, there is little hope for success in light of Obama's failed (and much larger) surge in 2009. Instead, Trump's surge will result in U.S. casualties and billions of dollars added to the debt, while doing nothing to move Afghanistan closer to a political resolution.

The quagmire strategy has spread across the Middle East, where Trump has increased the number of troops and civilians by 33%. The United States supports Saudi Arabia and their murderous intervention in Yemen's civil war, bombs the militant group al-Shabab in Somalia, while in Iraq there is still no end in sight to the U.S. commitment that began in 2003.

Nor are those nations likely to be the last quagmires the United States jumps into: Libya remains at war with itself ever since the NATO intervention in 2012, with three rival factions seeking control, one of which is allied with Islamist fighters.

The quagmire strategy leaves much to be desired. Most obviously, it does not work. Research shows that foreign-imposed regime change rarely produces positive results, while studies of civil war show that external intervention often simply prolongs conflicts.

America's experiences over the past 16 years confirm the research. The occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan have failed to prevent the rise of the Islamic State or the resurgence of the Taliban, and both nations suffer from more terrorism and political conflict than ever.

But perhaps the most troubling aspect of the quagmire strategy is how Trump has managed to entangle the United States ever more deeply without any real public debate. Not only has the Pentagon shied away from revealing the complete numbers of troops serving abroad, Congress has also abdicated its role as a counterbalance to the White House.

Trump's strategy rests on the same 2001 Authorization to Use Military Force that President Bush used after 9/11.

Legally, the existing AUMF does not provide anything close to the authority assumed by President Trump and President Obama before him. Politically, the fact that the United States is waging war around the world without full transparency or Congressional debate and authorization is a stain on our democracy.

In a tragic irony, it seems that the President does not understand the path he has charted. In a recent tweet, he spoke of "bringing peace to the mess I inherited in the Middle East. I will get it all done, but what a mistake, in lives and dollars (6 trillion), to be there in the first place!"

If Trump indeed believes it was a mistake to engage in all of that military intervention and nation building as part of the war on terror, someone might want to tell him how much further down that road he is taking the country.

Thrall is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute's Defense and Foreign Policy Department and associate professor at George Mason University's Schar School of Policy and Government. Goepner, a retired colonel from the U.S. Air Force, is now a visiting research fellow at the Cato Institute.