

# The Detroit News

## Column: ‘America First’ coming soon?

Erik Goepner and A. Trevor Thrall

May 7, 2018

Although President Trump may lack a coherent strategic vision for international affairs, his general disinterest in the rest of the world and his strong feelings about “getting a good deal” have led him to propose, on repeated occasions, the withdrawal of American troops from abroad.

The puzzling question is that if Trump’s feelings on this issue are so strong, why has he repeatedly deferred to his advisers over Afghanistan, South Korea, and Syria? In each case Trump wanted to bring U.S. troops home and in each case his advisers talked him out of it.

Perhaps Trump’s advisers have convinced him to stay the course, in particular by emphasizing the potential risks of terrorism and destabilization that could arise should the United States decrease its military footprint abroad.

The pattern of Trump’s opposition to intervention and nation building while in office, however, contradicts the argument that he has been convinced of the wisdom of these deployments.

In August of 2017, for example, even as he announced a new Afghanistan policy that would keep American troops there without a timeline, Trump telegraphed his discomfort: “I also share their frustration over a foreign policy that has spent too much time, energy, money — and, most importantly, lives — trying to rebuild countries in our own image instead of pursuing our security interests above all other considerations.”

Then, in February of this year, Trump clashed with his chief of staff John Kelly over the withdrawal of all U.S. troops from South Korea ahead of the Winter Olympics. Kelly convinced Trump not to do so.

Nor was Trump unclear about his desire to withdraw American troops from Syria when he announced at a news conference in late March that “We’ll be coming out of Syria, like, very soon. Let the other people take care of it now.” But again, his advisers talked him out of an immediate withdrawal.

The argument that concerns about terror in the homeland motivated Trump to maintain the status quo, rather than some grand strategic ideas, is more persuasive. At one point during the discussions about Afghanistan Trump complained, “You guys want me to send troops everywhere. ... What’s the justification?” Secretary of Defense James Mattis answered, “Sir, we’re doing it to prevent a bomb from going off in Times Square.” With respect to Syria,

Trump's advisers argued that American troops were necessary to take care of the last purported remnants of the Islamic State. And after Trump conceded that he would not put an "arbitrary timeline" on pulling troops out of Syria, Mattis told a Senate committee that "We have to create local forces that can keep the pressure on any attempt by ISIS to try to (re-emerge)."

Trump knows what he wants, but it is likely that he defers to his advisers when they challenge him because they, not he, have the decades of experience dealing with security issues.

Amplifying their influence is the fact that Trump's advisers are defending both the status quo and the conventional Washington line. It is easy for Trump's generals to be confident; they are arguing for maintaining policies already in place that enjoy widespread support. It is far more difficult for Trump to be confident, especially since his desire to withdraw troops flies in the face of the bipartisan consensus about the American presence in the greater Middle East. If Trump stays the course, then the entire foreign policy establishment takes part of the blame if things don't go well. But if Trump withdraws American troops against the advice of his advisers, then he alone will pay the political price if things go wrong.

If this assessment is correct, the recent tussle over Syria policy may indicate Trump's confidence is rising. Though he did eventually back off from his demand for an immediate withdrawal of troops, he let his military commanders know that he expected the troops to start withdrawing within six months. Given the complicated and often contradictory nature of Trump's previous foreign policy pronouncements, it would be misguided to assume that Trump's desire to bring troops home reflects a careful calculation of American interests and grand strategy. But if the troops do come home from Syria, despite continued resistance from Secretary Mattis and other military leaders, it will be the first clear signal that Trump's policy preferences are altering U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East.

*A. Trevor Thrall is an associate professor at the Schar School of Policy and Government at George Mason University and a senior fellow at the Cato Institute. Erik Goepner is a visiting research fellow in the Cato Institute's Defense and Foreign Policy Department.*