

THE TRIBUNE

Trump's Getting America Bogged down Overseas

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December 20, 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 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.

The quagmire strategy has spread across the Middle East, where Trump has increased the number of troops and civilians by 33 percent.

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.

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.

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