



Between Trump and his administration

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The President of the United States and his administration seem to be at odds with each other. Be it the environment, travel ban, Nato or the Middle East crisis; they contradict each other on almost every issue.

Last week, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson read out a statement urging the Arab countries to “immediately take steps to de-escalate the situation [of severed ties with Qatar] and put forth a good faith effort to resolve their grievances they have with each other.”

Shortly after an hour, Trump appeared before the media at the White House and hinted that it was him who had suggested the aggressive action against Qatar. “The time had come to call on Qatar to end its [terrorism] funding,” he announced. He also outlined his meetings in Riyadh saying, “nations came together and spoke to me about confronting Qatar over its behaviour. So we had a decision to make. Do we take the easy road or do we finally take a hard but necessary action?”

The opposition in the administration was difficult to miss. Senator Chris Murphy, member of the Foreign Relations Committee, noticed the obvious, and tweeted, “I don’t think this is how foreign policy is supposed to work.”

The Secretary of State, who actually runs the diplomatic wing of the administration had called for a “calm and thoughtful dialogue with clear expectations and accountability among the parties in order to strengthen relationship.” He stated, “We ask that there be no further escalation by the parties in the region.”

Tillerson clarified that Qatar made progress in halting financial support and expelling terrorist elements. “Others must also continue to eliminate factions of support for violent organisations within their own border,” he said adding, “We call on the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Egypt to ease the blockade against Qatar. There are humanitarian consequences to this blockade.”

“The blockade is also impairing US and other international business activities in the region and has created a hardship on the people of Qatar and the people whose livelihoods depend on commerce with Qatar. The blockade is hindering US military actions in the region and the campaign against ISIS,” he said.

Tillerson had a point since Qatar is the regional headquarters for the US Central Command. It houses American equipment and around ten thousand troops that not only keep eyes on the Middle Eastern region but also monitor Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan from there. The Pentagon spokesperson told local media, “While current operations from Al Udeid Air Base have not been hindered or curtailed, the evolving situation is hindering our ability to plan for long-term military operations.”

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In a statement, the Defense Department said, “United States and the Coalition are grateful to the Qataris for their longstanding support of our presence and their enduring commitment to regional security. We have no plans to change our posture in Qatar.”

However, the staffers at the White House and the State Department struggled to present a common policy. “The United States continues to be in close communication with all the parties to resolve the issues and restore cooperation, which is so important to regional security,” said the White House spokesperson insisting that “the president had a very, very constructive conversation with the emir [of Qatar] during his visit to Riyadh.”

Similarly, the State department spokesperson maintained that, “Qatar has made some great efforts to try to stop financing of terror groups, including prosecuting financiers, freezing assets, and introducing stringent controls on its banking system.”

But Trump kept on praising Saudi Arabia for leading the bloc against Qatar. “So good to see the Saudi Arabia visit with the King and 50 countries already paying off,” he posted in a series of tweets, “They said they would take a hard line on funding extremism, and all reference was pointing to Qatar. Perhaps this will be the beginning of the end to the horror of terrorism!”

His reference to the visit has a story of its own. Trump’s first foreign visit as president was to Saudi Arabia where he joined member of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) to discuss extremism and terrorism. He had also announced over a 100 billion dollars arms deal to strengthen bilateral relations with Saudi Arabia. “There is no \$110 billion deal. Instead, there are a bunch of letters of interest or intent, but not contracts,” Bruce Riedel, director of the Brookings Intelligence Project, wrote in an article.

Riedel, who has also served at the Central Intelligence Agency and later as senior advisor on South Asia and the Middle East to the last four presidents of the United States, clarified in his article that “many are offers that the defense industry think the Saudis will be interested in some day.”

He maintained that it’s unlikely that the Saudis could pay for a \$110 billion deal any longer, due to low oil prices and the two-plus years old war in Yemen. “President Obama sold the Kingdom \$112 billion in weapons over eight years, most of which was a single, huge deal in 2012 negotiated by then Secretary Bob Gates. To get that deal through Congressional approval, Gates also negotiated a deal with Israel to compensate the Israelis and preserve their qualitative edge

over their Arab neighbours. With the fall in oil prices, the Saudis have struggled to meet their payments since,” he wrote.

Interestingly, President Trump also had a separate meeting with Qatar’s emir, Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad al-Thani, at the GCC moot where he had announced, “We are friends. We’ve been friends now for a long time ... our relationship is extremely good.”

Yet, Trump’s departure from what’s happening on the ground was obvious when he celebrated the blockade. “During my recent trip to the Middle East, I stated that there can no longer be funding of radical ideology,” he tweeted. “Leaders pointed to Qatar – look!”

But it wasn’t just Trump vs. Tillerson across the line from each other. It’s other heads of various departments, and even their high-level officials. Trump’s tweet aggravated America’s position. The US ambassador to Qatar, Dana Smith, jumped in to rescue diplomatic ties, and was quite frustrated with the confusing developments. “Increasingly difficult to wake up overseas to news from home, knowing I will spend today explaining our democracy and institutions,” she tweeted. Ultimately, the ambassador announced to resign from her post.

Meanwhile, Secretary of Defense, James Mattis, also observed that Qatar was moving in the right direction when it comes to curtailing its funding of terrorism. He stated that the United States needed to find a common ground with Qatar due to the two countries’ shared interest.

Experts are hopeful that diplomacy prevails. Emma Ashford, a research fellow at the Cato Institute, wrote that foreign policy often requires trade offs. It is, no doubt, possible that long-term pressure from regional states may induce Qatar to scale back the scope of its foreign policy. But this will come at the cost of other US foreign policy objectives in the region. “As the president will eventually learn, in foreign policy, you really can’t always get everything you want.”