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## **Is Donald Trump the Best the Republicans Can Do on Foreign Policy?**

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Donald Trump has wrecked the best plans of nearly a score of "serious" Republican presidential candidates. Conservative activists who view themselves as insurgents find themselves treated as the new GOP establishment. Party professionals are debating how to derail a candidacy which they had expected to implode by now.

It is wondrous to behold. Thy name is schadenfreude.

No doubt, the bombastic Donald is an unlikely president. Yet what may be most extraordinary about his campaign is that on foreign policy, at least, he may be the most sensible Republican in the race. He isn't good, but it is the "mainstream" and "acceptable" Republicans who are most extreme, dangerous, and unrealistic.

Not that Trump would ever admit that. With typical hyperbole he declared that "I'm the most militaristic person" in the race. But all of the leading Republican candidates, with occasional hints of heterodoxy (it's not clear where Rand Paul really stands these days), favor a policy of intervention and war. Compared to them Trump sometimes sounds like a veritable peacenik.

At the first Republican debate one suspects the GOP crew was prepared to break into the Maori Haka while adding a chorus of John McCain's "bomb, bomb, bomb, bomb Iran" to their routine. They were almost indistinguishable from each other. Except for Trump.

First, the GOP candidates scream in apocalyptic terms. Said Chris Christie: "I don't believe that I have ever lived in a time in my life when the world was a more dangerous and scary place." Jeb Bush argued that "the world is slipping out of control" and America's security is "in the balance." This is nonsense. When in history has a country been as secure as America from existential and even substantial threats? The world is dangerous today, but not so much for the U.S., which dominates the globe like no country has ever before done.

Hyperbole is Trump's stock in trade, yet he has used it only sparingly on foreign policy. Referring to North Korea, for instance, he claimed: "this world is just blowing up around us." But he used that as a justification for talking to North Korea, not intervening in even more wars.

Second, the Republicans generally refuse to criticize George W. Bush's disastrous misadventure in Iraq. Last campaign Rick Perry saw no fault with the Iraq invasion: "America had won the war but our president [Obama] failed to secure the peace." Jeb Bush's latest position is that ousting Saddam Hussein was a "pretty good deal." Presumably if you don't count dead Americans, dead allied personnel, dead Iraqis, widespread sectarian violence, mass refugee flows, increased Iranian influence, regional instability, and the rise of the Islamic State.

In contrast, the Donald said "I was not a fan of going to Iraq." With justification he asked how someone like Rubio is "going to lead us" if he can't say where he stands on such an issue.

Third, the Republican candidates blame the rise of the Islamic State on Barack Obama. For a brief moment Rand Paul instead pointed to George W. Bush, but after being shouted down by the pro-war mob he dropped the argument. To everyone else ISIL appeared magically -- for instance, Rick Santorum claimed that the Islamic State "came about because they hate everything that we believe in." Why did the movement gain such success last year? Because Obama did not keep troops on the Euphrates.

As one would expect from a GOP political meme, this claim is false at every level. The Islamic State grew out of al Qaeda in Iraq, which arose to fight the U.S. occupation and Shia-majority rule. Former Baathists and Sunni tribes enabled ISIL's blitzkrieg across Iraq's Sunni heartland because they came to prefer an Islamist Dark Age to murderous Shia rule. There were no U.S. troops in Iraq because George W. Bush failed to win agreement from the Maliki government. Nor would a few thousand U.S. troops have stopped the Islamic state; instead, a garrison would have provided a convenient target for outraged radicals of every sectarian viewpoint.

In contrast, Trump understands that the basic mistake was invading Iraq. Said Trump: "They went into Iraq. They destabilized the Middle East. It was a big mistake. Okay, now we're there. And you have ISIS. And I said this was going to happen."

Fourth, in general everyone appears to believe in having the U.S. busy fighting throughout the Middle East. Marco Rubio said that ISIL's presence in Iraq today "might require some element of U.S. ground power in order to finish the job." He also advocated deployment of Special Forces to Yemen.

Jeb Bush proposed a new war dedicated to "throwing back the barbarians of ISIS." America has "to take the offensive, to keep it, and to prevail." Earlier he refused to speculate on how many Americans should remain in Iraq now, but he cited the 10,000 level once sought by his brother. At that point he merely called for embedding Americans in Iraqi combat units.

Many Republicans also supported the war in Libya. Lindsey Graham was a militaristic cheerleader at the time. Perry endorsed U.S. intervention, only claiming that he would have done it better. Rubio said the bombing should have started sooner.

Alas, the impact of Obama's misadventure there mirrored that in Iraq, though with slightly less disastrous consequences: Another country was destroyed, sectarian war was ignited, civil war was triggered, and chaotic imbroglio was created, all inviting the Islamic State's presence.

Some GOP candidates are demanding that the U.S. intervene in Syria. The ever irresponsible Graham pressed for U.S. military action for years. Bush proposed that Washington join Syria's civil war with "a coordinated, international effort" to strengthen generally ineffective "moderate" forces and establishment not only of a "no-fly zone" but "multiple safe zones," which would require substantial U.S. military involvement. His approach would make a complete national breakdown or Islamic State takeover more likely.

Against ISIL Trump also recently advocated "boots on the ground," but for a unique purpose: "I said you take away their wealth, that you go and knock the hell out of the oil, take back the oil." Four years ago he similarly complained that "We get nothing from Libya," despite the great expense. So the U.S. should be involved only if Americans get to "keep the oil." The same should have been done, in his view, in Iraq. At least he hasn't advocated warring against Syria's government or Yemen's rebels.

Fifth, other enemies wait, such as China. For instance, Christie decried Beijing's activities, seeing in them great danger for America: "In the South China Sea, Chinese vessels raise islands and military bases ... in disputed waters." Scott Walker insisted on stopping "their territorial expansion into international waters." Four years ago Perry also expressed his concern over Beijing.

Trump apparently doesn't view war as an option against Beijing. Rather, he sees the People's Republic of China primarily as an economic competitor. His mercantilist, protectionist views were evident when he declared in his announcement speech that he would "bring back our jobs from China." He also said he would "get tough with" and "out-negotiate" the Chinese, but thankfully not bomb them.

Mexico also is seen as a problem, mostly because of illegal immigration into the U.S. Last campaign Perry declared that it might be necessary to deploy U.S. troops to Mexico. Trump wants to impose the equivalent of economic sanctions to force Mexico to build a Berlin Wall, preventing its people from leaving. He didn't mention militarizing the border.

Sixth, all the other Republicans, including Paul, apparently view Iran as the unspeakable enemy. All would block the Obama nuclear deal and most appear ready to tear it up -- on his first day as president, said Walker. Of course, none offer any evidence that Tehran would accept a diktat, making war the likely outcome.

Rubio also complained: "Most threatening of all, we've seen Iran expand its influence throughout the Middle East." Bush criticized Obama for not addressing the issue instead of nuclear weapons. Of course, the most important impetus for Tehran's increased influence was the invasion of Iraq, supported by most of the GOP candidates.

Trump is a harsh critic of the nuclear agreement. Yet most of his fears involve Israel, not the U.S., perhaps because he recognizes that Tehran does not threaten America. Anyway, he announced: "I will police that deal. You know, I've taken over some bad contracts. ... I would police that contract so tough that they don't have a chance." Perhaps he recognized that dumping the deal would leave the U.S. worse off -- isolated and alone imposing sanctions while Tehran continued its nuclear work. He didn't worry about Iran's less than impressive influence in neighbors wrecked by war.

Seventh, the GOP candidates have spoken almost in unison on the need to support allies. They treat handing out security guarantees as similar to accumulating Facebook friends: the more the merrier, irrespective of whom or why. For instance, Christie said "building stronger alliances" was a "pillar" of his policy. He was particularly upset that the Saudi king decided not to come to America to the administration's Gulf summit.

Rubio said the U.S. must "reinforce our alliances" and "commit to the military reinforcement of Eastern Europe." Washington must stop "planned force drawdowns" and ensure "a more permanent forward defense." Washington should send weapons to Ukraine and impose additional sanctions. Finally, the U.S. should "enlarge NATO," adding Montenegro and, if it "chooses," Ukraine.

Bush complained that "We have lost the trust and confidence of our friends," There should be "no light between our closest allies, like Israel, like our neighborhood, like NATO." Bush also insisted on rebuilding "our relationships with allies and key relationships in the Middle East, including the Persian Gulf states and of course Egypt." Walker insisted on protecting our allies' interests separate from our own.

Most of America's major allies are well able to defend themselves. The Europeans, for instance, have a combined population and GDP greater than America and much greater than Russia. South Korea has twice the population and around 40 times the GDP of the North. These nations should be defending America, not the reverse.

It makes no sense to add allies which are irrelevant, such as Montenegro, or security black holes, such as Ukraine. The latter would put the U.S. on a confrontation path with nuclear-armed Russia, which treats its borders as a vital interest. America has nothing at stake which warrants that kind of risky confrontation.

Many of America's official friends are more oppressive than Washington's enemies. Saudi Arabia, for instance, is a totalitarian state, with neither political nor religious liberty. Egypt today is more repressive than under Mubarak. The Central Asian nations are among the world's worst dictatorships.

Nevertheless, Rubio insisted that America "stand with those who share our values and interests" and complained that President Obama "demonstrated a disregard for our moral purpose." Bush contended that "our foreign policy must be routed in a critical principle. Let's call it the liberty -- let's call it liberty diplomacy." Christie insisted that U.S. foreign policy is based on "partnership with the people and nations who share our values,"

Here, Trump is at his refreshing best. Only on Israel has Trump sounded like most Republicans, shamelessly pandering. In contrast, in 1987 he called on the U.S. to "stop paying to defend countries that can afford to defend themselves." He then pointed to Japan and Saudi Arabia. He advocated that we "let America's economy grow unencumbered by the cost of defending those who can easily afford to pay us for the defense of their freedom."

It makes more sense to simply let allies defend themselves instead of trying to charge them -- after all, how much is American blood worth? Nevertheless, only Trump asked why U.S. politicians turned allies into welfare dependents. He termed Riyadh the "world's biggest funder

of terrorism," complaining that "Saudi Arabia funnels our petro dollars, our very own money, to fund the terrorists that seek to destroy our people while the Saudis rely on us to protect them."

A couple years ago he said: "I keep asking, how long will we go on defending South Korea from North Korea without payment?" More recently he noted that when "the young man from North Korea starts acting up and having one of his fits, we immediately get our ships going. We get our aircraft. We get nothing for this." He praised Dennis Rodman's trip to North Korea: "Maybe it's not the worst thing that somebody actually calls." This nod to diplomacy and engagement appears to reverse his previous call for preemptive military action if the North continued its nuclear program.

Similarly, Trump explained: "Pulling back from Europe would save this country millions of dollars annually. The cost of stationing NATO troops in Europe is enormous." Regarding Ukraine, he asked: "Where's Germany? Where are the countries of Europe leading? I don't mind helping them. ... But why isn't Germany ... leading this charge? Why is the United States?" He has no alliance expansion agenda, indicating indifference to Ukraine's inclusion.

Ninth, all the Republicans, including Rand Paul want to spend more on the military. Trump sounds similar. We need to "build up our military so strong, so powerful that nobody will mess with us," he declared, even though it already is. He complained that the percentage of GDP for the military has dropped and "we are still living off the Reagan military buildup." Of course, that increase was to defeat the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact, both of which disappeared a quarter century ago. The threat today is far less.

Moreover, most of what the military does today -- subsidize rich allies, remake failed societies, join other states' civil wars -- has nothing to do with protecting America. The fact that Washington devotes a lesser percentage of the national GDP is irrelevant: the real GDP today is a dozen times as large as during WWII and eight times during the Korean War. Thus, one percent of GDP today provides a multiple the resources during earlier times.

Trump obviously is not a deep thinker on foreign policy or anything else. And who knows what he would actually do if he unexpectedly ended up in the Oval Office. Nevertheless, on some issues he exhibits a degree of common sense lacked by virtually every other Republican in the race. The Republican Party desperately needs to have serious debate over foreign and military policy.

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