



Trump's foreign policy pattern is all bark and no bite

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Recent foreign policy moves by the Trump administration disclose a pattern of thought and action that merits being seen in its totality. Towards the end of 2017 the administration released a vigorous national security strategy that not only labeled China and Russia as adversaries but also "took no prisoners" in asserting that the U.S. would act vigorously against challenges.

The administration has also suspended military aid to Pakistan, threatened to cut off aid to the Palestinian Authority, threatened members of the UN that it will hold their votes against the U.S. on Jerusalem against them when they appeal for assistance, and intensified both its pressure and fire-breathing rhetoric against North Korea.

We also know that President Trump mused aloud about a military option regarding Venezuela's dictatorial Maduro government that has brought the country to its economic knees.

Whatever one thinks about any of the individual actions taken by the administration, taken in their totality these policies represent not so much an America first stance that is redolent of the old isolationists but the rhetorical invocation of threat and compulsion, if not force.

In this sense, this pattern reflects the personality of President Trump. As his tweets and verbal statements make clear, he has an inner compulsion to lash out at forces and people who are obstructing him. And his mentorship at the hands of Roy Cohn who specialized in the intimidation and humiliation of adversaries clearly adds to this inner drive. But the increasing resort to this kind of behavioral pattern forces us to ask whether Washington will follow through on these threats and what benefits this policy actually brings to the U.S.?

The New Yorker recently detailed how Chinese leadership came to believe that for all the threats Trump is, in their words "a paper tiger" and that he could be played. Indeed, if one looks at the totality of U.S.-China policy in 2017 it is clear that China has made major gains at American expense.

Despite its continuing lip service to the objective of denuclearizing North Korea, China continues covertly to supply North Korea with oil and it has long been apparent that it will not allow American power to endanger North Korea let alone strike at it militarily. But despite rhetorical calls for a trade war and continuing Chinese restrictions on free trade with the U.S. there has been no penalty levied by the administration against China.

In fact, the net outcome of U.S. policy has been to hand China a huge and wholly undeserved victory by terminating the negotiations for a Pacific trade protocol and regime as outlined in the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). Now China has this field all to itself and doubts about U.S. leadership abound across Asia.

Likewise, we did not and probably will not invade Venezuela, much to the relief of Latin American governments. Neither have we actually done much to Iran other than to annoy it by Trump's rhetorical interventions — which, in the absence of policy, make a bad situation worse because there is no follow through.

Merely antagonizing people, for no discernible reason, is neither a policy nor an answer to contemporary problems. Rather it is an expression of petulance that is not only unbecoming to a president but fails to advance any kind of rational American interests in such cases.

Thus it is also likely that the threats against the over 100 members of the UN General Assembly who voted against us on Jerusalem will not amount to much, leaving them contemptuous of U.S. policy and distrustful of its consistency or force.

In the Palestinian case, cutting off their aid may actually force them to negotiate seriously for a state rather than pontificate and about Israeli obstruction.

As Josef Joffe has written, the Palestinian leadership has consistently, for generations, refused to accept anything other than a state built on the ruins of Israel, which is hardly a suicidal player. But they could threaten the world and Israel with another Intifada. That would cause many casualties and fatalities but probably again not lead them to any kind of political resolution.

Similarly, Pakistan, a notorious sponsor of state terrorism who has played the U.S. for over a generation, may threaten to go to China and Russia. Since Pakistan has already turned to both those states for astronomical amounts of money, a threat of blackmail may be less imposing than it looks.

While the administration's refusal to succumb to this kind of blackmail from Pakistani and the Palestinian Authority is new, unusual, and even possibly refreshing; it is still not clear by any means that the overall pattern discerned here materially advances U.S. interests.

Indeed, with North Korea and China we have failed to achieve anything except to discredit the administration at home or abroad, as neither of those states will stop Pyongyang's nuclearization. Not invading Venezuela may be wise but what are our goals here and what can and will we do about it?

The fact that these and so many other questions remain unanswered and in so many questions our threats are unlikely to be implemented can only add to the questions and doubts about the coherence of the administration and the staying power of the U.S. s challenges to our policy multiply.

While individual policies listed here may be sound and meritorious decisions, is this pattern really conducive to the advancement of U.S. interests? The fact that we must raise such questions indicates what rhetorical belligerence absent follow through is already costing us and will cost our children in the future.

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