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Trump is right to seek an end to America's wars

The President's desire to disentangle the country from costly overseas conflicts must be encouraged

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There is no shortage of policies and decisions made by President Trump worth criticising, but since the earliest days of his presidential campaign, he has expressed at least one belief that deserves to be encouraged, not denigrated: the desire to disentangle the United States from costly overseas conflicts.

Mr Trump's noninterventionist impulse has always fit uncomfortably with the team he assembled, particularly the latest, more hawkish iteration in his ever-shifting foreign policy cast. For a time, the President grudgingly deferred, allowing conflicts to escalate in virtually every theatre he inherited.

Recently, the President's preferences seemed to prevail, at least momentarily, as he tweeted his decision to withdraw 2,000 American troops from Syria and suggested he would do the same with as many as 7,000 from Afghanistan.

Since then, a bewildering public tug of war between the President and his national security team has left a trail of confusion. It remains unclear whether the United States is withdrawing from Syria right away or gradually; whether it wait until the Islamic State is wholly defeated or it believes that is already the case; whether the United States will protect its Syrian Kurdish allies, somehow; and whether it remains committed to its goal of ending Iran's presence in Syria.

A perpetual presence in Syria – or a withdrawal?

The absence of anything akin to a decision-making process in the

administration is not surprising. The surprise is that among the most vocal critics of President Trump's withdrawal announcement have been not just Republican hawks but also a chorus of voices on the left.

Progressive opponents of Trumpism should resist the urge to do so over the wrong transgressions. We may not know what the policy actually is until Mr Trump implements it, but on Syria and Afghanistan, his initial instinct — to do less, with less — was correct. It is his execution, timing and inability to leverage his decisions for the best possible terms that were damaging.

Mr Trump is correct that the better course is to extricate ourselves from Syria, but his fatal error has been in its implementation.

In Syria, whatever one's view of the tragic and long-debated trajectory of the conflict or past policy decisions, the United States has few remaining, achievable interests at stake: preventing the Islamic State from regaining territorial control, protecting the predominantly Kurdish forces on whom Washington relied to do most of the counterterrorist fighting and supporting our allies in their efforts to defend against threats emanating from Syrian territory. The success of none of those goals will be determined by a relatively small, long-term military presence.

Mr Trump misled the country by claiming that the Islamic State has been defeated. But the argument that American boots on the ground are needed to address its remaining strongholds is a recipe for a perpetual presence, since the terrorist group represents a generational threat that can be countered and contained but not soon wholly vanquished.

Good idea, bad implementation

In truth, many on the right who denounced Mr Trump's announcement did so principally because they see Syria as a venue for confronting Iran. But that is chasing an illusory and dangerous goal: it is hard to see how a few thousand American troops could counter tens of thousands of Iranian and Iranian-backed forces, aligned both with Moscow and President Bashar al-Assad's regime that has largely won the civil war.

A chorus of criticism inevitably greeted Mr Trump's recent statement that Iranian forces 'can do what they want' in Syria. Yet read as a statement of fact rather than the extension of a green light, he stumbled upon a self-evident truth: Notwithstanding Israel's successful efforts to limit Iran's importation of advanced weaponry into Syria, Tehran's

position in the country is essentially secure.

Mr Trump is correct that the better course is to extricate ourselves from Syria, but his fatal error has been in its implementation. Most egregiously, his snap decision during a telephone call with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey betrayed our Kurdish partners who led the fight against the Islamic State and risked being exposed to assault by Turkey and the Syrian regime.

Troop withdrawals can be messy and costly even in the best of circumstances. But that is not a reason to drift into forever wars while searching for the perfect exit.

A more responsible course would have been to use the prospect of an eventual American withdrawal to help avert a subsequent conflict between the Kurds and their adversaries. If, as he is now suggesting, the President withdraws the troops more gradually rather than right away, that opportunity might still exist.

It requires Mr Trump to use that time wisely. He should start by abandoning the dangerous notion of Turkey seizing areas controlled by Kurdish forces and instead allow the Kurds — in the absence of long-term American protection — to negotiate an understanding with the Syrian regime. This might entail returning some aspects of the Syrian state to northeast Syria, Kurdish forces retaining their military capacity but lowering its profile and a degree of self-governance for the region.

Withdrawing is the right thing to do

In Afghanistan too, Mr Trump's bottom line was correct. After more than 17 years of combat and a virtual stalemate, at best, for more than a decade, there is little rationale for continuing to expend American blood and treasure on a conflict trending badly, with unclear objectives.

But here too, the self-proclaimed 'great negotiator' erred in folding America's limited cards for nothing in return, rather than using his willingness to withdraw as an incentive for the Taliban — currently locked in negotiations with Mr Trump's own diplomats — to make peace.

So much is objectionable about the Trump era that it is hard for critics to know which targets to strike. But principled opposition requires that progressive opponents of President Trump not distort their beliefs for quick rhetorical wins. Whatever administration eventually follows will have many messes to clean up and will need to distinguish those that truly matter.

Inevitably, the United States will face threats that will require the use of military force. But we ought to continually question our enduring involvement in faraway conflicts, particularly when they come at a terrible cost to the United States and local populations as in Afghanistan and Iraq; make us complicit in abuses as in Yemen; entangle us with unsavoury partners as occurred with some elements of the Syrian opposition; or exacerbate anti-American sentiment as our broader counterterrorism campaign often did.

Troop withdrawals can be messy and costly even in the best of circumstances. But that is not a reason to drift into forever wars while searching for the perfect exit. It is a reason to be disciplined about objectives and judicious about intervening in the first place.

Mr Trump's Syria and Afghanistan decisions, assuming he sticks to them, may well lead to disastrous outcomes because of how they were executed, their timing, the complete lack of consultation with allies and experts and his utter failure to leverage them. All of that justifies a verdict of malpractice. But one can render that judgment while acknowledging that done differently, withdrawing is the right thing to do.

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