Trump's foreign policy is more than a chaotic mess

The US president is running a reckless, militarised security policy according to the wishes of Pentagon hardliners. With 1360 days left in his term, the world will be lucky if it gets away without a limited nuclear war

The Trump administration's whip-snapping pivots and off-the-cuff freelancing in foreign policy can look like the uncalculated muddle of a neophyte. Trump, say many country leaders, is so unpredictable that they can't begin to anticipate what's next, which they say destabilises the world order. Some experts and political leaders have even concluded it's so happenstance there's no coherent U.S. foreign policy at all at the moment.

This view, however, is wrong – except for the analysis of destabilisation. A Trumpian foreign policy has gelled in his first hundred days, and though most of it is nothing new, it is calculated. Far from the "America first" isolationism he pledged on the campaign trail, the president has adopted a resolutely interventionist, hawkish stance – one even more aggressive and irresponsible than George W. Bush's geopolitics. The Trump administration seems to take its playbook from the Pentagon's hardliners, which could well lead the US into new wars, the worst case scenario being a limited nuclear conflict, a horror that unfortunately can't be ruled out.

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In just the first hundred days, the world has witnessed a perilous ratcheting up of tensions in the Middle East and Asia. Trump's belligerent foreign engagements may gut his campaign promises but for a politician badly in need of plaudits, it's easier to order lethal air strikes than get anything at all through Congress. It gives him something to show his base.

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The Republicans, even Trump foes such as Lindsey Graham and John McCain, have cheered Trump's metamorphosis from isolationist to interventionist. In the world seen through the prism of Republican hawks, whose spokesperson in the White House is Vice President Mike Pence (the similar role of Dick Cheney in the W. Bush administration can't be overlooked), America is still the world's No. 1 superpower, a status that they believe slipped during the Obama administration because the US was willing to punch way below its weight. Obama, they claim, was much too reluctant to use American power to further US interests. The US can and will lead, believe the hawks. Allies as well as enemies defy Washington to their own detriment: Trump has already threatened Europe if it doesn't expand military budgets, North Korea if it doesn't halt its nuclear programme, and Iran if it doesn't stop meddling in the region.

Civilian bloodbath

The hawks believe the U.S. possesses military might that it will employ unilaterally in the wider world – and during Trumps first hundred days has: so far in Syria, Yemen, Iraq, and Afghanistan. These missions won the US nothing and cost over one thousand civilians their lives. This arsenal, pledge the hawks, will be substantially buffed up for the purpose – nuclear warheads as well as conventional weaponry. As far as the Trump administration is concerned, this assertive, unilateralist vision of American power can work: if it's applied resolutely and in quantity. Along with using the big stick, the hawks talk loudly and tough, a perfect fit for Trump. Much of this we seen before, say in the administration of W. Bush and Ronald Reagan.

But Trump could prove much more dangerous than the run-of-the-mill Republican hawk. There's a hard right in the US military establishment (think, for example, of Trump's short-lived National Security Advisor, the former chief of defence intelligence, Michael Flynn) that has existed for decades, but never had the ear of a president the way it currently does Trump's. The danger is that Trump can't or won't say "no" to it.

Take the biggest issue on the table: nuclear defence policy. President Obama battled the generals on it. In his efforts to advance nuclear non-proliferation when he first took office in 2009, he butted heads mightily with the Pentagon, which wanted to increase the $54 billion that the US spent annually on nuclear weapons and weapons-related programmes (total defence budget: $664 billion). It opposed nuclear arms cuts that

were meant to leverage other countries to scale back, proposing instead the building of a new generation of nuclear weaponry: on top of the deployed arsenal of some 2,600 warheads, with a 2,500-strong reserve, and another 4,000 awaiting dismantlement.

Earlier this year, a Pentagon advisory committee called for investing in new nuclear weapons and perhaps even the resumption of nuclear testing. The report also suggested researching less-powerful nuclear weapons that could be deployed without igniting full-scale nuclear war. It recommended "a more flexible nuclear enterprise that could produce, if needed, a rapid, tailored nuclear option for limited use." It's hard to imagine that Trump would say no.

A president without precedent

The hardliners' base has always been in the Pentagon. Every president receives the generals' advice, but not every one of them takes it. John F. Kennedy, for example, was given the invasion of Cuba during the missile crisis in 1962 as a viable option. Kennedy though realised that an escalation of that calibre could start a nuclear war, so he resolved it otherwise. Past presidents had, for the most part, fended off the Pentagon's nuclear sabre-rattling. But there's little to suggest that Trump will follow suit.

In terms of nuclear threat, North Korea is the most critical case. By pushing Pyongyang with threats and displays of force, or perhaps with a pre-emptive conventional attack, Washington risks triggering a nuclear response from the North Koreans. *Time* magazine rightly asks: Trump operates under the assumption that Kim Jong Un is "rational… But is he willing to bet nuclear apocalypse on that?" Believers in limited, "tactical" nuclear wars, however, don't think that the use of just one or two nuclear weapons will result in "nuclear apocalypse." Rather, for them, this kind of war is survivable and winnable.

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In the Middle East, the US has expanded the war zones in which it's engaging now for years. The 7 April bombing of a Syrian airport was testimony that force would be used at will, without consulting either Congress or allies, and that it would, at least in part, replace strategy. Since the strike, nothing much more has happened. Its biggest impact was to alienate Russia, presumably an ally Trump was going to do business with. Russia's former president Dmitry Medvedev said Washington's Syrian

strikes put the US “on the verge of a military clash with Russia.” Though overstatement, just raising the possibility of it illustrates that it can’t be ruled out.

Loose cannons

Before the one-off Syria strike, the botched 29 January raid on the Yemeni Al Qaeda killed two dozen civilians and a Navy SEAL. Yet Trump’s war against the insurgents goes on: In March alone, the US military carried out 70 airstrikes on Yemeni rebels – more than twice the number for all of 2016.

According to the Council on Foreign Relations, Trump ordered 75 drone strikes or raids in non-battlefield settings during his first 74 days in office. Obama signed off on 542 such strikes during eight years in Washington, which amounted to about one strike every 5.4 days. In comparison, since Trump took office, he’s overseen about one strike a day on average.

And in Afghanistan on April 13, the US military dropped the most powerful non-nuclear bomb in its arsenal on ISIS positions, describing it as a "tactical" move. Afghan officials say that just 36 ISIS fighters were killed. But for the Pentagon it was a huge success: one of their combat untested missile got a trying out. More of the GBU-43/B Massive Ordnance Air Blast Bomb, as they’re called, can certainly be ordered in the $54 billion increase in defence spending the administration is planning. And, of course, toward Iran there’s a sharp, new tone, the Trump administration threatening to upend the nuclear deal that the US and European allies worked so hard to secure.

The world’s a less safe place just one hundred days into the Trump presidency – a place more dangerous than the world at the height of the Cold War or after 9/11. On the campaign trail, Trump said could imagine enabling Japan and South Korea to obtain nuclear weapons to counter North Korea. He refused to rule out using nuclear weapons in a military conflict in Europe. Should Trump have to deliver on his radical threats, a new war in the Middle East or Asia would be inevitable. Could the administration really imagine waging a limited nuclear war? Certainly there are figures in the Pentagon that can.



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