

THE TRUMP FOREIGN POLICY LEGACY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

In his foreign policy, President Trump followed new approaches and shaped the international stage in ways that will be hard for the Biden administration to reverse. These approaches, nowhere more apparent than in the Middle East, include, first, focus on near peer competition, in the Middle East, that included containing Russia, Iran, and Islamic violent extremists such as al-Qaida and particularly Daesh or ISIS. The second is reliance upon partners and allies. The Trump administration succeeded by its standards using the above approaches: Iran's regional advance was contested and to some degree constrained, Teheran is under far greater economic pressure and faced with a regional coalition encouraged by the Abraham Accords. The administration had moved most of the region beyond the endless Palestinian issue as the lodestone of regional diplomacy, destroyed the ISIS territorial state, and with help from Turkey contained Russian advances. With the exception of the Iranian nuclear file, this looks like success. The issue now is whether the Biden administration can build on this success or revert to Obama policies now obsolete.

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With the departure of President Trump on 20 January 2021, Americans, whether supporters or opponents of Trump, can breathe a sigh of relief that four years of non-stop drama and challenges to conventional wisdom are over, at least until Donald Trump can find another pulpit to boom out to the country. But the changing of the Presidential guard gives us also an opportunity to review his legacy, which Senator Lindsey Graham on the Senate Floor 6 January defined as a “consequential presidency.” Certainly so in foreign policy, where President Trump followed new approaches and shaped the international stage in ways that will be hard for the Biden administration to reverse.

These were nowhere more apparent than in the Middle East. Trump applied consistent rules over all three of America’s major engagement zones—Europe, East Asia, and the Middle East—but his policies on the ground, if not the principles that shaped them, in the first two areas—restrain Russia, contain China, deter North Korea, likely would have been followed by any other American administration, given the realities after 2016 in those areas. In the Middle East, however, we see the biggest diversion from not only the Obama administration’s policies but arguably those of at least the last two before him. And it was also in the Middle East that one sees Trump’s strategic principles play out most clearly.

Guides for Action

What were these principles? Walter Russell Mead, writing in the Winter Edition of *Foreign Affairs*, defines them (and Trump) as “Jacksonian,” e.g., following the policies of President Andrew Jackson in the 1830’s, as opposed to the “Wilsonian” and “Hamiltonian” presidents America has had since Woodrow Wilson himself (with a gap 1920-1932).¹ Jacksonians are nationalists, believe in a strong military, but are little interested either in the Hamiltonian approach of a leading international role especially in finance and trade, or in the Wilsonian approach to produce a just, pacifistic international order and spread democratic values. Trump’s philosophy was laid out in his administration’s National Security Strategy released in 2017. This author spoke at that time with the administration official responsible for its drafting, and she assured him that the president was closely involved in developing the concepts that underlay the document.

The first is near peer competition, at the global level (Russia, China), and regional (North Korea, Iran, Islamic violent extremists such as al-Qaida and particularly Daesh or ISIS). The second is reliance upon partners and allies. Each of these concepts had certain corollaries. For near peer competition, these included building up America’s economic strength and particularly its military, as well as avoiding, or

¹ Walter Russell Mead, “The End of the Wilsonian Era,” *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-12-08/end-wilsonian-era>

withdrawing from, “endless wars” such as Afghanistan which drained the military, discouraged the American people from any military engagement, and diverted attention from serious threats. For partners and allies, the corollaries include a strictly transactional approach—a zero sum of military commitments and even trade relationships with individual partners from Japan to Germany to organizations such as NATO and the GCC: am I, Donald Trump, getting more from this partner (good), or is it getting more from me (bad)? Thus Trump pressed allies to spend more on defense (preferably buying weapons from the US), and undertake operations in their near-abroad themselves with America in a supporting, not leading, role. In return, Trump eschewed any involvement in, or even criticism of, these partners’ and allies’ internal affairs. He could care less whether Saudi Arabia was a democracy, nor how many people (if not Americans) were jailed by President Sisi.

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Trump simply did not get the “romance” of the collective security system. First, he at least dimly understood that to allow it to operate with its leader, the US, exercising considerable independent control, that leader had to “contribute” more in money, military force, and engagement than other system members, even if the latter were more direct beneficiaries of the system’s security. For Trump, neither the realpolitik version of a global order, nor certainly the Wilsonian liberal internationalist version, made sense as they required a net “loss” on his accounting books, and over time a weakening of “USA Inc.,” in favor of international organizations and law. In his unique way, rather than hiding this skepticism, the typical posture of “realist” American foreign policy actors, he reviled in ridiculing the idea of an international order. Those especially in Western Europe somewhat removed from direct threats—which Trump was dealing with—but much wedded to the ideology of a liberal international order, never forgave him. Unfortunately, a generally anti-Trump mass media in the US focused on just these Western European states as characteristic of the international community as a whole, ignoring the many important buffer states working well with the Trump administration, and thus argued falsely that he was destroying the entire global collective security system.

Focus on the Middle East

His different approach was again most obvious in the Middle East. The impact of waves of ever-reoccurring violence (1967 and Yom Kippur Wars; Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan and Iran-Iraq war; Tanker War and Kuwait invasion; 2003 invasion of

Iraq; wars arising from the Arab Spring), along with the emergence of terrorist movements with long, dangerous arms into Europe, Russia, and North America (al-Qaida, ISIS), convinced Washington, once it had more freedom of maneuver after the Cold War, to act dramatically in the region to fundamentally change this pattern.

Thus Presidents Bush and Obama pursued transformational policies in the region, with both diplomatic and military tools, with the goal of improving radically the internal political and even social situation in Muslim countries, in the view of one skeptical analyst, Michael Mandelbaum, trying to “turn them into Denmark.” These policies were laid out openly in Bush’s second inaugural address (“The survival of liberty in our land increasingly depends on the success of liberty in other lands. The best hope for peace in our world is the expansion of freedom in all the world”);² and Obama’s 2009 Cairo speech (“I...seek a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world, one based on mutual interest and mutual respect, and one based upon the truth that America and Islam are not exclusive”).³ The results were discouraging: the first led to two long, unpopular wars. The second saw failed “Arab Spring” interventions in Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and Syria, and fundamental misunderstanding of Iran.

Trump had no interest in any of this; rather his goal was to contain threats to America and its partners and allies with minimum effort by the former and maximum effort by the latter. Unlike his predecessors he was, as outlined in detail below, basically successful.

Dealing with the Threats

For Trump Job One was Iran. He opposed the JCPOA nuclear deal as insufficient, because it did not constrain Iran’s rampage through the region, allowed enrichment, and was time-limited. In fact, from 2013, when the initial, interim nuclear agreement was initialed and 2018, when the US pulled out of the JCPOA, Iran ran amok, and Arab leaders warned of Iran’s alleged “control” of four Arab capitals—Sa’naa, Baghdad, Damascus, and Beirut. This, not Iran’s nuclear ambitions, had become the single biggest destabilizing element in the region, and Trump responded. This response was laid out by Secretary Pompeo in 2018: a maximalist twelve-point set of actions Iran had to comply with to restore normal relations, ranging from better regional behavior to more comprehensive controls on its nuclear and missile programs.

Opponents argued that Iran would never accept such expansive concessions. But they differed little from the demands of the early Obama administration. In both

² President George W. Bush, “Second Inaugural Address,” speech given on 20 January 2005, Washington, D.C.

³ President Barack Obama, “The President’s Speech in Cairo: A New Beginning,” speech given on 4 June 2009, Cairo.

cases, they were maximalist initial negotiating positions. Trump wanted to negotiate deals with Iran, but his priority was as much deterrence of regional adventurism and nuclear capability as necessary, and within that, enough agreement as possible. Obama's priority was reversed: as much agreement as necessary (to get a deal which he saw as transformational), and within that, as much deterrence of regional adventurism and nuclear capability as possible (i.e. and still get an agreement). But in dealing with Obama the Iranians accepted no genuine constraints on their regional activities and only limited, short duration ones on their nuclear and missile programs. Obama bought that deal anyway, commenting that the Saudis would have to "share the Middle East" with Iran, and accepted continued enrichment. Trump refused any such compromise, and so no real progress was made with Iran on a new arrangement during his tenure.

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That meant that the Trump administration had to keep the pressure on Iran, through sanctions on its economy, and across the region, but following Trump's principles, largely through local surrogates. Thus Washington supported Saudi Arabia and the UAE against Iran's local Shi'a allies, the Houthis, in the confused Yemen conflict. In Iraq, Trump focused US troops, the lead contingent of the International Coalition to Defeat ISIS, on the counter-terrorism fight. But when challenged by Iranian-backed militias, Trump struck back savagely in a tit-for-tat escalation in December 2019 and January 2020 leading to the killing of Quds Force Commander Soleimani and an Iranian ballistic missile strike on US forces in Iraq. US forces remain in Iraq, officially to keep ISIS suppressed, but in a strategic sense, to balance Iran. In Lebanon, the Trump administration basically viewed the country as under the control of Iran's local ally, Hezbollah, with few options to reverse the situation. However, when the Lebanese economy collapsed in late 2020, the Trump administration did not bail it out, making clear that if Iranian allies run aground, as in Lebanon, because of bad, Iranian-influenced governance, the US will not save them.

In Syria the Trump administration undertook, by 2018, the most ambitious regional program to contain Iran and undercut its local ally, the Assad regime. Washington thus not only supported vigorously the UN effort under UNSCR 2254 to resolve the conflict with a new constitutional regime, but placed Damascus under ever

more crushing economic sanctions and diplomatic isolation. It also made the withdrawal of all Iranian-commanded forces from Syria a priority American goal in the conflict, and to that end supported in various ways Israel's military campaign against Iranian strategic targets throughout Syria. This policy also led the US to strongly support Turkey's position in the northwest, including holding terrain against Syrian, Russian, and Iranian attacks in Idlib. American forces deployed to northeast Syria, and at the Tanf tri-border area in the south in the campaign against ISIS were maintained, in good part to deny terrain to Assad and his allies, and complicate their military calculus. Finally, the US, ultimately joined by France and the UK, in contrast to Obama, responded militarily when Assad crossed the chemical weapons "red line," leading Assad to give up use of such weapons, a major victory for Washington.

This more aggressive US policy in Syria led to diplomatic and military confrontations with Russia. Under Obama, Russia was seen as a diplomatic partner in a possible compromise solution to Syria. The Trump administration continued to talk to Moscow on a solution, but was prepared to maintain a relentless pressure campaign on Syria in the likely case the Russians would not cooperate. Faced with this campaign, Russia reacted both diplomatically and politically, attempting to undercut the UN political process, and to cajole or coerce US forces out of Syria, while challenging them directly with Wagner mercenaries and later, Russian patrols. The US responded vigorously in every case. When Russia deployed heavily-armed Wagner forces to Libya in 2020 to support rebel leader Haftar's assault on the legitimate Libyan government, the US indirectly supported Turkish military action to defend the capital, Tripoli. By the end of the Trump administration there was general agreement in Washington that Russia was pressing, wherever an opportunity arose in the Middle East, to challenge the American-led security system, and thus had to be confronted.

Finally, Trump put much effort into the campaign against ISIS, until its capital, Raqqa, fell in 2017. Thereafter, he felt much the same way toward the Defeat-ISIS campaign as he did the American and NATO effort in Afghanistan, unnecessary "endless wars" from which the US should withdraw. His withdrawal from Afghanistan, tied to negotiations with the Taliban, was almost complete at the end of his administration. He tried three times to withdraw forces from Syria, but was dissuaded by those in the administration who argued that these troops were dual-purposed to balance Iran, and by Coalition partners who feared ISIS would regenerate without US forces on the ground.

Partners and Allies

Trump by his own inclinations and that of the Republican Party was extremely

solicitous of Israel. He saw it as a vital ally against Iran, and it proved itself one with its direct strikes into Iran and campaign against Iranian strategic systems in Syria. In return Trump overturned decades of American “balance” between Israel and its Arab neighbors, by distancing the US from the “two state” solution with the Palestinians, moving the American embassy to Jerusalem, and recognizing Israeli annexation of the Golan Heights. In return, he was able to win Israeli trust, while showing Arab countries that the US “had their back” against Iran and terrorists. That opened the door to the Abraham Accords, a breakthrough agreement that established an anti-Iranian coalition of Arab states, the US, and Israel. But at the same time it signaled that the Palestinian issue was no longer seen by Washington or by many Arab states as the number one issue in the region. Rather, Iran’s expansion was highlighted.

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The Gulf states benefited particularly from Trump’s support, generally against Iran in the region and specifically in Yemen. (However Trump made clear in response to the Iranian attacks against a Saudi oil facility and an American drone that he would not use lethal force unless the provocation was major.) In return they facilitated American military deployments, and worked in various ways with Israel, to the point of two GCC states, Bahrain and the UAE, joining the Abraham Accords. The split within the GCC between Qatar on one side and the UAE and Saudi Arabia on the other bedeviled the administration for almost four years, but the reconciliation led by the Saudis in late 2020 was a boon to both the outgoing and incoming American administrations. Trump’s gift to the GCC in return, aside from enhanced security, was total disregard for the state of human rights and rule of law in these states, in particular with the Saudi Government, despite credible evidence of its role in the murder of journalist Jamal Kashoggi.

Traditional allies Jordan and Egypt continued to receive high levels of military assistance and support against threats on their border (Jordan) and inside it (Egypt in the Sinai). And particularly in the case of Egypt, Trump here as well ignored significant human rights and rule of law violations. Nevertheless these two partners received

less attention than Israel, Turkey, and the Gulf states. Both were preoccupied with internal political and economic problems, and both, although diplomatic partners of Israel, were wary about the Abraham Accords and the apparent abandoning of the Palestinian cause.

Turkey was, as is often the case, a unique issue within Washington's Middle East policy. The auspices for a strong relationship were present in 2017. Trump and Erdogan both shared a distaste of their Western European NATO partners' constant nagging about their commitment to democracy, and neither wasted time criticizing the other's internal policies. Both "Alpha Male" strongmen with a tilt towards authoritarianism, and a preference for plain speaking, they hit it off from the start. Trump understood Turkey's potential as an ally against Russia, Iran, and perhaps China. He cared little about Erdogan's flirting with Moscow, or even Halkbank's violation of American sanctions against Iran. Yet by the end of the administration the relationship was in dire shape. The reason was neither leader could maintain good relations in the face of almost total hostility to the relationship on the part of each's population and political elites. With Americans, it was the long-festering hostility by Turkey's traditional foes, the Greek, Armenian, and human rights lobbies, along with new adherents to a "bash Turkey" platform: the pro-Israeli lobby, conservative anti-Islamic circles, which saw Erdogan as an enemy, and the military, still licking the wounds of Turkey's alleged "betrayal" over Iraq in 2003, and, most importantly, the purchase of S-400 missiles from Russia.

For Turks, across the political spectrum, it was the long-standing distrust of any "great power," along with legitimate concerns about the American reaction to the 2016 coup, refuge for Fetullah Gulen, and support for the PKK-offshoot SDF in northeastern Syria. Traditionally, a Turkish leader can either push back against public distrust of Washington (Turgut Ozal's approach), or reinforce it. President Erdogan chose the latter. That, and the failure of imagination on the part of Turkey on the S-400 purchase, tipped the relationship. It placed at risk both the integrity of America's most ambitious, costly weapons program ever, the F-35, while opening the door to a Russian strategic victory on global arms sales. Perhaps so used to Washington complaining to Ankara about every issue, Turks could not see that this one was truly different. But that was what the senior bureaucracy was there to sense, and for some reason it did not function. In the end, the highest levels of the Trump administration concluded that President Erdogan simply did not listen, took Trump's friendship for granted, and cared little about a good relationship. This is all the more the pity as the US and Turkey, as Trump sensed, shared many security concerns and Turkey played major roles in the containment of Russia from Nagorno-Karabakh to Tripoli via Idlib, in NATO, in the pushback against Iran and Assad, and in the defeat of ISIS.

Conclusion

The Trump administration thus succeeded by its standards: Iran, compared to 2017, was more constrained in the region, under far greater economic pressure, and faced with a tightly established regional coalition encouraged by the Abraham Accords. The administration had moved most of the region beyond the endless Palestinian issue as the lodestone of regional diplomacy, destroyed the ISIS territorial state, and, albeit with significant help from Turkey, contained Russian advances. The region thus looks more secure now than at the end of the Obama administration, with the exception of the Iranian nuclear file, where Iran allegedly is 4-6 months from amassing enough highly enriched uranium for one nuclear device (as compared to one year before the US pulled out of the JCPOA and Iran started violating in response). The issue now is whether the Biden administration can build on this success. Part of the problem is the prevalence of “old think” in American foreign policy regardless of the party or president in power. The Obama administration, whose veterans from Biden on down staff the new administration foreign policy and security teams, put its priority first on the Iranian nuclear account, then on the Israel-Palestinian peace process, and, third, on meddling in the internal affairs of various countries, including key allies, either for transformational reasons, or to meet Obama’s standards of proper behavior. If the new team returns to that agenda, then there will be a significant break with the Trump “package.” Furthermore, given the reality of near peer and regional aggression since 2016, and the commitment of America’s regional partners to coalesce against it, a return to the Obama agenda could create problems for the Biden administration in simultaneously maintaining close relations with partners and bolstering regional security and stability.