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Trump's first 100 days: Capitulating to the destructive status quo on foreign policy

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The end of President Trump's first 100 days in office, April 29, is upon us. It's an arbitrary measure, of course, but a useful opportunity nonetheless to reflect on the shape of the new administration.

This time around, perhaps nowhere is reflection more needful than over foreign policy. That's so on three counts. First, it is on international relations that the Constitution gives the president the greatest authority and discretion. Congress alone holds the power to start a war, but when a president enters office with multiple wars already in progress, he has significant latitude to adjust tactics, pursue different goals, or exit a conflict altogether.

Second, as presidents are wont to claim, President Trump inherited a mess on foreign policy (President Obama did, too, and he did not clean it up). The U.S. military is active in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Pakistan, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen, and the Trump administration also faces difficult diplomatic challenges over China, North Korea, Russia, and the NATO alliance, to list conservatively.

And third, President Trump has never been one for specifics where foreign policy is concerned. His "Contract with the American Voter" devoted just one paragraph in two pages to the subject, only one sentence of which addressed foreign policy proper. That sentence was a pledge to give the military, unaudited and egregiously wasteful, even more money.

Trump is prone to throwing hardball critiques at others' mistakes (think Iraq from George W. Bush and Libya from Obama and Hillary Clinton) while offering sweeping promises of an America First approach that learns from those errors and abandons hubristic regime change projects. In practice, however, the president has yet to articulate a grand strategy incorporating those promises and critiques, and his early foreign policy moves suggest the influence of a Washington establishment uninterested in facilitating any real change.

Several of Trump's foreign policy moves are worth reviewing. The first was the Yemen raid against al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) that left one American soldier dead along with more than two dozen civilians, including a little girl with American citizenship. The incident naturally drew attention because of the casualties, but too often lost in the shuffle was how emblematic this failed raid is of the broader war on terror today.

The raid took place in a country where Congress has not authorized U.S. military engagement, where the United States is primarily active assisting Saudi Arabia. It's a conflict in which we are plagued by mission creep, tied to allies of at best dubious ideology and loyalties (the Saudi coalition has credibly been accused of war crimes), and spilling American blood and treasure even though there are no vital U.S. interests at stake.

Ask Americans why our military is fighting in Yemen and they are unlikely to be able to tell you—in part because there is no compelling reason for us to aid the Saudi cause, and in part because, aside from this raid, the Trump and Obama administrations alike have in Yemen waged a quiet war, untroubled by the input of Congress or the public.

The second key incident is the Syria strike, the 59 Tomahawk missiles Trump launched at an airfield controlled by the Bashar al-Assad regime in response to a chemical weapon attack the Syrian government is believed to have perpetrated. Much like the Yemen raid, this strike was conducted without the congressional authorization required by the Constitution, and it did not serve to defend any U.S. interests.

Since then, talk of regime change—the very foreign policy error Trump most consistently rejected on the campaign trail—is in the air. Defense Secretary James Mattis said Friday there is “no doubt” Assad has retained a significant stash of chemical weapons in violation of his promises to the contrary. Mattis may well be right, though he did not provide any hard evidence to support his claim. Either way, the echoes of 2003 are loud.

Where once Trump disavowed nation-building and argued “the approach of fighting Assad and [the Islamic State] simultaneously was madness, and idiocy,” now he seems to be teetering on the brink of a regime change project of grand proportions.

Tellingly, it is this strike that won Trump nearly unanimous applause from “the Blob,” the bipartisan Washington foreign policy establishment that consistently supports reckless military interventions, naïve efforts to spread democracy abroad, and America permanently in the uniform of world police—in other words, that refuses to learn from the mistakes and misadventures of the past 16 years.

Third is the MOAB strike, the Massive Ordnance Air Blast (or “Mother Of All Bombs) dropped in Afghanistan, along with the general posture of toughness toward North Korea. These may seem like disparate situations, and in a practical sense they are. But both are informed by what seems to be the Trump administration’s foreign policy *modus operandi* to date: the same, but more muscular.

Indeed, as all these moves make clear, the Trump administration appears to be acting at the direction of Defense Secretary James Mattis and National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster. Neither may be a traditional neoconservative, but both have guided a president fundamentally inexperienced in foreign policy towards maintaining the Washington status quo.

Whatever his intentions, President Trump is not pursuing a substantially different grand strategy than that of his predecessor. He promised more realism and restraint but has delivered only more bombast and power projection, a capitulation to the interventionist norm with differences that amount only to window dressing.

This is in clear contradiction to Trump’s own campaign message—vague as it was on foreign policy—and markedly out of step with the demonstrable wishes of a war-weary public. As the first 100 days come to a close, Trump must remember he was elected in no small part because he promised to reject the failed interventionism of the Blob, to develop a strictly defensive foreign policy, and to stop wasting American resources applying military solutions to political problems abroad.