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US Foreign Policy is as Bellicose as Ever

By Serge Halimi
September 6, 2017

It only took a few months under Donald Trump's presidency for the US to withdraw from the Paris climate agreement, impose new sanctions on Russia, reverse the normalisation of diplomatic relations with Cuba, announce its intention to pull out of the Iran nuclear deal, warn Pakistan, threaten Venezuela with military intervention, and declare a readiness to strike North Korea with 'fire and fury ... the likes of which this world has never seen before.' The Philippines, Saudi Arabia and Israel are the only countries on better terms with the US since Trump's arrival in the White House on 20 January.

Trump is not solely responsible for this increased tension: Republican neoconservatives, Democrats and the media all applauded him this spring when he ordered military manoeuvres in Asia and the launch of 59 missiles towards an air base in Syria (1). At the same time, he was prevented from acting when he broached a possible rapprochement with Moscow, and was even forced to sign off on new US sanctions against Russia. US foreign policy's point of equilibrium is effectively being determined by Republican phobias (Iran, Cuba, Venezuela) often shared by Democrats, and by Democrat hatreds (Russia, Syria) endorsed by most Republicans. If there is a peace party in Washington, it's currently well hidden.

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Yet last year's presidential debate suggested the electorate wanted to see an end to US imperial inclinations (2). Foreign policy issues were not initially on Trump's campaign agenda, and when he did speak about them it was to suggest an approach mostly antithetical to that of the Washington establishment (the military, experts, think-tanks, specialist reviews) and to his current approach. He promised to subordinate geopolitical considerations to US economic interests, speaking both to supporters of economic nationalism ('America First') — there are many in states that have suffered economic devastation — and to those convinced it was time for realism after many years of continuous war that had led to stagnation and widespread chaos in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya. 'We would have been better off if we [had] never looked at the Middle East for the last 15 years,' Trump said in April 2016 (3), condemning US 'arrogance' that caused 'one disaster after another' and cost 'thousands of American lives and many trillions of dollars.'

This diagnosis, unexpected from a Republican candidate, chimed with the view of the Democratic Party's most progressive wing. Peggy Noonan, who wrote some of the most notable speeches of Ronald Reagan and his successor George HW Bush, said as much during the campaign: 'He positioned himself to Hillary Clinton's left on foreign policy — she is hawkish, too eager for assertions of US military power, and has bad judgment. This will be the first time in modern history a Republican presidential candidate is to the left of the Democrat, and that will make things interesting' (4).

'Be prepared to walk'

And things *are* interesting, though not quite as Noonan predicted. While the left holds that peace comes from fairer relations between countries rather than intimidation, Trump, who is completely indifferent to global public opinion, operates like a horse trader looking for the best deal for himself and his voters, irrespective of consequences elsewhere. So for Trump the problem of military alliances is not so much that they risk amplifying conflicts rather than discouraging them, but that they cost the American taxpayer too much; as a result of picking up the tab, the US is becoming a 'third-world nation'. 'NATO is obsolete,' Trump told supporters in April 2016. 'We defend Japan, we defend Germany, and they pay us only a fraction. Saudi Arabia would not exist, except that we defend them. If we left it, it would fall. You've always got to be prepared to walk. If you can't walk, you don't make a good deal.'

Trump was after a good deal from Russia. A new partnership would have reversed deteriorating relations between the powers by encouraging their alliance against ISIS and recognising the importance of Ukraine to Russia's security. Current US paranoia about everything Kremlin-related has encouraged amnesia about what President Barack Obama said in 2016, after the annexation of the Crimea and Russia's direct intervention in Syria. He too put the danger posed by President Vladimir Putin into perspective: the interventions in Ukraine and the Middle East were, Obama said, improvised 'in response to a client state that was about to slip out of his grasp' (5).

Obama went on: 'The Russians can't change us or significantly weaken us. They are a smaller country, they are a weaker country, their economy doesn't produce anything that anybody wants to buy, except oil and gas and arms.' What he feared most about Putin was the sympathy he

inspired in Trump and his supporters: ‘37% of Republican voters approve of Putin, the former head of the KGB. Ronald Reagan would roll over in his grave’ (6).

By January 2017, Reagan’s eternal rest was no longer threatened. ‘Presidents come and go but the policy never changes,’ Putin concluded (7). Historians will study this period when there was a convergence in the objectives of the US intelligence agencies, the leaders of the Hillary Clinton wing of the Democratic Party, the majority of Republican politicians and the anti-Trump media. That common objective was stopping any entente between Moscow and Washington.

Each group had its own motive. The intelligence community and elements in the Pentagon feared a rapprochement between Trump and Putin would deprive them of a ‘presentable’ enemy once ISIS’s military power was destroyed. The Clinton camp was keen to ascribe an unexpected defeat to a cause other than the candidate and her inept campaign; Moscow’s alleged hacking of Democratic Party emails fitted the bill. And the neocons, who ‘promoted the Iraq war, detest Putin and consider Israel’s security non-negotiable’ (8), hated Trump’s neo-isolationist instincts.

The media, especially the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, eagerly sought a new Watergate scandal and knew their middle-class, urban, educated readers loathe Trump for his vulgarity, affection for the far right, violence and lack of culture (9). So they were searching for any information or rumour that could cause his removal or force a resignation. As in Agatha Christie’s *Murder on the Orient Express*, everyone had his particular motive for striking the same victim.

The intrigue developed quickly as these four areas have fairly porous boundaries. The understanding between Republican hawks such as John McCain, chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, and the military-industrial complex was a given. The architects of recent US imperial adventures, especially Iraq, had not enjoyed the 2016 campaign or Trump’s jibes about their expertise. During the campaign, some 50 intellectuals and officials announced that, despite being Republicans, they would not support Trump because he ‘would put at risk our country’s national security and wellbeing.’ Some went so far as to vote for Clinton (10).

Ambitions of a ‘deep state’?

The press feared that Trump’s incompetence would threaten the US-dominated international order. It had no problem with military crusades, especially when emblazoned with grand humanitarian, internationalist or progressive principles. According to the press criteria, Putin and his predilection for rightwing nationalists were obvious culprits. But so were Saudi Arabia or Israel, though that did not prevent the Saudis being able to count on the ferociously anti-Russian *Wall Street Journal*, or Israel enjoying the support of almost all US media, despite having a far-right element in its government.

Just over a week before Trump took office, journalist Glenn Greenwald, who broke the Edward Snowden story that revealed the mass surveillance programmes run by the National Security Agency, warned of the direction of travel. He observed that the US media had become the intelligence services’ ‘most valuable instrument, much of which reflexively reveres, serves, believes, and sides with hidden intelligence officials.’ This at a time when ‘Democrats, still

reeling from their unexpected and traumatic election loss as well as a systemic collapse of their party, seemingly divorced further and further from reason with each passing day, are willing — *eager* — to embrace any claim, cheer any tactic, align with any villain, regardless of how unsupported, tawdry and damaging those behaviours might be' (11).

The anti-Russian coalition hadn't then achieved all its objectives, but Greenwald already discerned the ambitions of a 'deep state'. 'There really is, at this point,' he said 'obvious open warfare between this unelected but very powerful faction that resides in Washington and sees presidents come and go, on the one hand, and the person that the American democracy elected to be the president on the other.' One suspicion, fed by the intelligence services, galvanised all Trump's enemies: Moscow had compromising secrets about Trump — financial, electoral, sexual — capable of paralysing him should a crisis between the two countries occur (12).

Covert opposition to Trump

The suspicion of such a murky understanding, summed up by the pro-Clinton economist Paul Krugman as a 'Trump-Putin ticket', has transformed the anti-Russian activity into a domestic political weapon against a president increasingly hated outside the ultraconservative bloc. It is no longer unusual to hear leftwing activists turn FBI or CIA apologists, since these agencies became a home for a covert opposition to Trump and the source of many leaks.

This is why the Democratic Party data hack, which the US intelligence services allege is the work of the Russians, obsesses the party, and the press. It strikes two targets: delegitimising Trump's election and stopping his promotion of a thaw with Russia. Has Washington's aggrieved reaction to a foreign power's interference in a state's domestic affairs, and its elections, struck no one as odd? Why do just a handful of people point out that, not long ago, Angela Merkel's phone was tapped not by the Kremlin but by the Obama administration?

Respect: a US airman attends a transfer vehicle carrying the bodies of two soldiers killed by an IED in Afghanistan

The silence was once broken when the Republican representative for North Carolina, Tom Tillis, questioned former CIA director James Clapper in January: 'The United States has been involved in one way or another in 81 different elections since World War II. That doesn't include coups or the regime changes, some tangible evidence where we have tried to affect an outcome to our purpose. Russia has done it some 36 times.' This perspective rarely disturbs the *New York Times*'s fulminations against Moscow's trickery.

The *Times* also failed to inform younger readers that Russia's president Boris Yeltsin, who picked Putin as his successor in 1999, had been re-elected in 1996, though seriously ill and often drunk, in a fraudulent election conducted with the assistance of US advisers and the overt support of President Bill Clinton. The *Times* hailed the result as 'a victory for Russian democracy' and declared that 'the forces of democracy and reform won a vital but not definitive victory in Russia yesterday ... For the first time in history, a free Russia has freely chosen its leader.'

Now the *Times* is in the vanguard of those preparing psychologically for conflict with Russia. There is almost no remaining resistance to its line. On the right, as the *Wall Street Journal* called for the US to arm Ukraine on 3 August, Vice-President Mike Pence spoke on a visit to Estonia about 'the spectre of [Russian] aggression', encouraged Georgia to join NATO, and paid tribute to Montenegro, NATO's newest member.

No longer getting his way

But the *Times*, far from worrying about these provocative gestures coinciding with heightened tensions between great powers (trade sanctions against Russia, Moscow's expulsion of US diplomats), poured oil on the fire. On 2 August it praised the reaffirmation of 'America's commitment to defend democratic nations against those countries that would undermine them' and regretted that Mike Pence's views 'aren't as eagerly embraced and celebrated by the man he works for back in the White House.' At this stage, it doesn't matter any more what Trump thinks. He is no longer able to get his way on the issue. Moscow has noted this and is drawing its own conclusions.

This month Russian military manoeuvres, on a scale unprecedented since the fall of the Berlin Wall, will mobilise up to 100,000 personnel near Ukraine and the Baltic states. This has already provided the *Times* with material for a front page that recalled the 2002-3 scare campaign against Iraq's 'weapons of mass destruction'. It quoted a US colonel: 'We know when we wake up every morning who the threat is.' It gave a run-down of Russia's arsenal, all the more alarming given their tendency for 'subterfuge, cyber attacks and information warfare.' It mentioned a NATO convoy from Germany to Bulgaria that permitted children 'to climb up on the Stryker fighting vehicles.' The best part of this embedded journalism was when the *Times* described the location of the Russian exercises, being conducted on its own territory and in Belarus, as 'around NATO's periphery'.

Any peacemaking efforts from France or Germany would therefore be treated as appeasement by a neoconservative establishment that has regained control in Washington, and would be attacked by almost all US media. It has come to the point where, seeing the sharp drop in the popularity of President Emmanuel Macron, the *Times* came up with a false explanation that reflected its own obsession: 'Mr Macron's glittering reception of the American and Russian presidents, Donald J Trump and Vladimir V Putin, both disliked in France, especially on the left, did not help' (13).

Can European states halt this bellicose machinery, and do they want to? The Korean crisis should have reminded them that the US is not much concerned about causing damage far from home. On 1 August Republican Senator Lindsey Graham attempted to lend credibility to Trump's nuclear threat to North Korea by saying: 'If thousands die, they're going to die over there — they're not going to die here.' Graham insisted Trump shared his view: 'He's told me that to my face.'

Notes.

(1) See Michael T Klare, 'Trump the hawk', *Le Monde diplomatique*, English edition, May 2017.

- (2) See Benoît Bréville, 'What US foreign policy?', *Le Monde diplomatique*, English edition, May 2016.
- (3) Donald Trump, 'Today', NBC, 21 April 2016.
- (4) Peggy Noonan, 'Simple patriotism trumps ideology', *The Wall Street Journal*, New York, 28 April 2016.
- (5) 'The Obama Doctrine', interview with Jeffrey Goldberg, *The Atlantic*, Boston, April 2016.
- (6) Press conference, 16 December 2016.
- (7) *Le Figaro*, Paris, 31 May 2017.
- (8) Michael Crowley, 'GOP hawks declare war on Trump', *Politico*, Arlington, 3 March 2016.
- (9) See Serge Halimi, 'Trump, the know-nothing victor', *Le Monde diplomatique*, English edition, December 2016.
- (10) 'Statement by former national security officials', www.globalsecurity.org/.
- (11) Fox News, 12 January 2017. The day before, Greenwald had set out his thoughts in 'The deep state goes to war with president-elect, using unverified claims, as Democrats cheer', *The Intercept*, 11 January 2017.
- (12) See Serge Halimi, 'All Russian puppets?' and 'The deep state', *Le Monde diplomatique*, English edition, January and May 2017.
- (13) Adam Nossiter, 'Macron's honeymoon comes to a halt', *The New York Times*, 7 August 2017.