

Trump's Foreign Policy Incoherence

Exclusive: Powerful forces are arrayed against any significant changes that President Trump may try to make in foreign policy, a dilemma made worse by his own ineptness and staffing troubles, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

President Trump's emerging foreign policy is one of contradictions and chaos, caught up in a combination of old establishment orthodoxies and some fresh recognition of reality but without any strong strategic thinker capable of separating one from the other and leading the administration in a thoughtful direction.

The examples of new thinking include abandoning President Obama's fitful – and bloody – campaign to force “regime change” in Syria; accepting a more realistic solution to the political mess in Libya; and trying to cooperate with Russia on combating terrorism, such as the fight against Islamic State and Al Qaeda, and reducing international tensions, such as the ongoing crisis in Ukraine.

But Team Trump also is hobbled by its inability to break free from many of the groupthinks that have dominated Official Washington for the past quarter century or so as the foreign policy establishment fell under the domination of the neoconservatives and their junior partners, the liberal interventionists, virtually banishing the formerly influential “realists” as well as the few peace advocates.

This enduring neocon/liberal-hawk strength – reflected in what all the “important people” know to be true – has left senior Trump officials still pandering to the Saudis and the Israelis; repeating the neocon mantra that “Iran is the principal source of terrorism” (though that is clearly not true given the support for Al Qaeda and other Sunni terror groups coming from U.S. “allies” such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar); and falling into line with NATO's hype of Russia as the new global villain.

Trapped in Old Thinking

What is increasingly clear is that Trump's inner circle lacks a comprehensive understanding about how these various foreign-policy forces fit together. Beyond Trump's transactional approach in demanding that “allies” – from Japan to Saudi Arabia to European nations in NATO – pay more for their costly U.S. security umbrella – Trump and his advisers lack a consistent foreign policy message.

Perhaps the most supple thinker is Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner, who started

out with a traditional fondness toward Israel and Saudi Arabia but now seems to be at the forefront of the administration's pragmatists, looking at novel ways of resolving the crises in Iraq, Syria and Libya, even if that means dealing with the Iranians and the Russians. Kushner, however, lacks knowledge and experience in foreign affairs and is hamstrung by a lack of support staff as his portfolio of responsibilities keeps expanding.

Other senior foreign policy officials – the likes of Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, Defense Secretary James Mattis and United Nations Ambassador Nikki Haley – fit more into the traditionalist mold, touting the unquestioned value of the alliances with Israel, Saudi Arabia, NATO and the European Union – although even these more conventional voices have acquiesced on the recognition of reality in Syria, that Bashar al-Assad's government isn't likely to be overthrown soon and that the fight against Islamic State takes precedence.

Yet, regarding a more thorough overhaul of U.S. foreign policy – getting tough with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States for their clandestine support for Sunni militants, demanding that Israel get serious in working out a peace agreement with the Palestinians, and forging a détente with Russia – the Tillerson-Mattis-Haley triangle appears resistant to going outside the foreign policy frame that the neocons have built.

Haley, with her own political ambitions, appears to relish her role as a favorite of Israel and the neocons, getting a particularly warm welcome when she addressed the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) last week and vowed to shield Israel from U.N. criticism.

The Neocon Rise

Over the past 35 years, the neocons have managed to amass extraordinary power in Washington because – unlike most of their adversaries – they possess a purposeful vision of what they want to accomplish, principally protecting Israel's interests in the Middle East and lavishing money on the Military Industrial Complex. They also push a Western neoliberal economic model on the world that breaks down traditional social values and enriches a global financial elite.

This combination of goals ensures a steady flow of many millions of dollars into the neocons' coffers via think tanks, non-governmental organizations, consultancies and business interests. But the neocons have proven their worth. Generally speaking, they are bright, articulate and politically savvy.

The neocons made their first big move into the centers of power during the Reagan administration, filling a void for skilled functionaries. After getting

credentialed in the 1980s, the neocons expanded their reach into the major media and big-time think tanks in the 1990s during the Clinton administration and fully claimed the levers of power in the 2000s under George W. Bush.

By the Obama administration, the neocons had so ensconced themselves in the centers of Washington power that they continued to exert great influence even though President Obama was never exactly one of them, coming more from the “realist” camp although he surrounded himself with liberal interventionists.

The world views of these liberal hawks matched closely with the neocons’, differing mostly in the rationalizations used for sponsoring “regime changes.” The neocons typically cited “terrorism” and “democracy-promotion” while the liberal interventionists would rally around “humanitarian concerns.” But they usually ended up in the same place, such as supporting the Iraq invasion in 2003 and the proxy war in Syria from 2011-2016.

Lacking Control

Throughout his presidency, Obama never took firm control of his foreign policy. At the start, he enlisted a “team of rivals” – seasoned players who ran circles around him bureaucratically, such as Defense Secretary Robert Gates, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Gen. David Petraeus – and even in his second term, Obama let liberal hawks and neocons, such as Ambassador to the United Nations Samantha Power and Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Victoria Nuland, respectively, box him in.

Obama would often resist the most extreme schemes that these hawks would hatch, but he rarely challenged them directly, behaving more like a foot-dragger-in-chief than a forceful President.

Obama also let the neocons and the liberal interventionists control the narratives, turning adversaries into “demons” and allies into “innocents.” Whether it was the Aug. 21, 2013 sarin attack outside Damascus (blamed on Syrian President Bashar al-Assad) or the July 17, 2014 shoot-down of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 over eastern Ukraine (blamed on Russian President Vladimir Putin), Obama didn’t let the dubious evidentiary cases interfere with the desired propaganda value of the incidents.

So, when Obama finally left office, he left behind not only a nettlesome batch of international crises – Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Yemen, Ukraine, South Sudan and a New Cold War with Russia – but also a series of exaggerated or false narratives that made resolving these trouble spots doubly difficult.

Trump’s Troubles

Under the best of circumstances, the Trump administration would have had a nearly impossible task unwinding the deceptive story lines and reaching out to foreign leaders who could actually help resolve these crises. But Donald Trump complicated the task with his own bizarre behavior, squandering his first days in office with silly complaints about whose Inauguration crowds were bigger and his absurd argument that he had really won the popular vote.

But the real challenge was how indoctrinated nearly all the “important people” in Washington had become after a quarter century or so of hearing almost exclusively the neocon point-of-view, which was built around the Israeli-Saudi viewpoint on the Middle East and on the need to demonize anyone who got in their way.

The cornerstone of Israel’s regional strategy derives from the fact that Lebanon’s Hezbollah militia bloodied the proud Israeli Defense Force when it was occupying southern Lebanon, forcing Israel to withdraw back to its borders and earning the Shiite militia the label of a “terrorist” organization. And, since Shiite-ruled Iran was helping Hezbollah, Iran soon became the chief sponsor of terrorism in Israeli eyes.

Because Israel insisted on that position, the U.S. government and the mainstream media fell in line. It didn’t matter that Saudi Arabia, Qatar and other Sunni regimes were financing and arming Al Qaeda and other terror groups that were attacking the West. Between Israel’s political clout in the United States and the Saudi financial power, Official Washington parroted what it was told. Even as Al Qaeda and later the Islamic State became the major terror groups attacking the West, all the “important people” in media and government still recited the mantra: “Iran is the principal sponsor of terrorism.”

Israel/Saudi Alliance

Israel’s obsession with Hezbollah and Saudi Arabia’s sectarian hatred of the Shiites led to other strategic decisions in the region. Since Syria was allied with Iran and Hezbollah – and was considered the centerpiece of the so-called “Shiite crescent” stretching from Tehran through Damascus to Beirut – “regime change” in Syria would deal a powerful blow to the regional enemies of both Israel and Saudi Arabia.

So, “regime change” in Syria became an important priority shared by the American neocons and – because Bashar al-Assad could be painted as a ruthless dictator – by the liberal interventionists as well. Half-heartedly, Obama went along with the call that “Assad must go,” but Obama still resisted pressure from Secretary of State Clinton and Ambassador Power to commit the U.S. military too deeply to what was becoming a messy sectarian war.

Despite this hesitancy, Obama joined with Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, Israel and others in arming and/or supporting various rebel factions – some deemed “moderate” – that coalesced under Sunni extremists associated with Al Qaeda (Nusra Front), Nusra’s ally Ahrar al-Sham, and Al Qaeda’s spin-off (Islamic State).

Still, Assad and his government proved more resistant to “regime change” than had been expected. But the neocon/liberal-hawk hopes were raised in August 2013 when a mysterious sarin attack outside Damascus was blamed on Assad although the evidence seemed to point to a provocation by Al Qaeda-linked terrorists. Nevertheless, the mainstream U.S. media, key “human rights” groups, and much of the U.S. government pinned the blame on Assad amid expectations of a major U.S. bombing campaign to devastate his military.

But Western intelligence analysts shared with Obama their doubts about who was responsible and the President called off the bombing at the last minute to the fury of many in Official Washington who chastised Obama for not enforcing his “red line” against chemical weapons use.

The Putin Problem

Then, to make matters worse for the “regime change” advocates, Russian President Putin intervened with a face-saving plan in which Assad surrendered his chemical weapons while still denying responsibility for the attack. With that move, Putin – who was also assisting Obama on negotiations to constrain Iran’s nuclear program and thus heading off another neocon-desired “regime change” mission – jumped to the top of international targets.

The neocons recognized the need to punish Putin and drive a wedge between Putin and Obama before they might turn their joint attention to something as sensitive as an Israeli-Palestinian peace deal. Ukraine became the convenient wedge.

By late September 2013, neocon Carl Gershman, president of the U.S.-government-funded National Endowment for Democracy, had identified Ukraine as the “biggest prize” as well as an important step toward eventually removing Putin from power in Russia. Between Gershman’s NED lavishing money on activists and Assistant Secretary Nuland’s machinations supporting violent protests in Kiev, the stage was set for Ukraine’s “regime change,” ousting elected President Viktor Yanukovich and installing a fiercely anti-Russian regime.

After Yanukovich’s ouster – with neo-Nazi and ultranationalist street fighters leading the charge on Feb. 22, 2014 – Crimea, an ethnic Russian stronghold where Russia’s Black Sea naval fleet was based, reacted to the coup in Kiev by voting to secede from Ukraine and rejoin Russia. Putin committed some Russian troops

already stationed on the peninsula to protect Crimea's decision, a move that Western propaganda portrayed as a "Russian invasion."

Across Europe and the U.S., an anti-Russian hysteria took hold that entrenched the neocons/liberal hawks in even greater control of Western thinking. At this point, Obama essentially capitulated and joined in the Russia-bashing.

His expected successor, Hillary Clinton, was even more committed to the neocon/liberal-hawk narrative. But Clinton's inept campaign and the last-minute intervention by FBI Director James Comey (briefly reopening an investigation into her use of a private email server while Secretary of State) led to the surprise result of Donald Trump's victory.

Oddballs and Outsiders

Trump, however, was unprepared for victory. He had around him a motley crew of oddballs and outsiders. Many detested and distrusted the Washington foreign policy establishment, which was dominated by neocons and liberal hawks, but Team Trump had no sophisticated understanding of the complex global and political challenges that faced the new and inexperienced President.

Many of his advisers also had absorbed the dominant groupthinks, especially those pushed by Israel, such as the falsehood that Iran was the principal source of terrorism.

At first, Trump and son-in-law Jared Kushner seemed to think that they might be able to broker an Israeli-Palestinian peace by getting Saudi Arabia to strong-arm the Palestinians into accepting Israeli dictates for a solution, called the "outside-in" plan. So, initially, there was the usual cozying up to the Israeli and Saudi "allies."

Meanwhile, Official Washington was busy trying to repel the Trump presidency much as a body deploys white cells to kill an infection. The chief method of attack was the charge of "Russian meddling" in the election and suspicions that it was coordinated with the Trump campaign. To achieve the goal of Trump's ouster, the mainstream media and the political elite adopted a revisionist history of the campaign, ignoring Clinton's numerous missteps and the key role played by Comey when he revived the FBI investigation into Clinton's email server just days before the Nov. 8 election.

Instead, the new groupthink was that some leaked emails earlier in the campaign revealing how the Democratic National Committee had tilted the playing field against Sen. Bernie Sanders and how Clinton's campaign had been hiding details of her speeches to Wall Street had somehow decided the election – and that Russia had hacked into those email accounts and passed the information onto

WikiLeaks.

WikiLeaks denied getting the emails from Russia but that claim was brushed aside, along with memories of the earlier analysis of what had caused Clinton's surprising defeat: her own incompetent campaign and Comey's intervention.

The poisonous climate created by Russia-gate further constrained Trump's possible outreach to Moscow for cooperation on resolving a number of global hotspots.

Although the Russia-gate accusers lacked evidence of collaboration between Team Trump and the Kremlin, the endless repetition of the charges had a powerful effect. In effect, the neocons and the liberal hawks exploited the "scandal" to protect their core interests. It now will be difficult for Trump to resolve Ukraine or cooperate with Russia on Syria and Libya or to team up with Russia to finally compel Israel to accept a reasonable agreement with the Palestinians.

Saudi Arabia also came up a winner with the Trump administration extending its support for the Saudi war on impoverished Yemen and the lifting of human rights constraints on arming Bahrain. In both cases, Sunni rulers are repressing Shiite-related populations and the violence is rationalized by the old mantra: "Iran is the principal source of terrorism."

There's also the hope among many in Official Washington and inside the mainstream media that Russia-gate can be transformed into an impeachment proceeding to remove Trump and put neocon-friendly Vice President Mike Pence in charge. He, in turn, would likely turn control of U.S. foreign policy over to the likes of neocon Senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham. The status quo ante would be restored.

That is why wielding the anti-Russia stick has been so tempting, offering a way to both bludgeon Trump and beat to death any nascent détente with Russia, which would give new hope for more "regime change" wars. For the neocons and their liberal-hawk sidekicks, that would be a win-win-win.

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book, *America's Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)).
