

# America's Absence in Istanbul: A Sign of Decline, Not Surrender

Team Trump missed the summit on Syria. In that, Patrick Lawrence sees another sign of Washington's failure to accept its loss of diplomatic primacy.

## Lost in the Memory

## Palace:

## US Leads, But No One

## Follows

By Patrick Lawrence

*Special to Consortium News*



You would hardly know it from reading the U.S. press, but a summit of considerable significance took place late last month. German, French, Russian, and Turkish leaders convened in Istanbul Oct. 27 to create a comprehensive plan to end the seven-year war in Syria. On the agenda: increase humanitarian aid, rebuild ruined towns and cities, assist returning refugees, draft a new constitution and arrange internationally supervised elections. All this will take time, but the Syria story is evolving from one of conflict to one of reconciliation and reconstruction.

Two features of the summit deserve special note.

The four nations are not all fast friends, to put it mildly. But they drew together to find common interests in resolving what may count as the worst crisis since the Cold War's end. Second, there was a conspicuous absence at the Istanbul gathering: the United States. Despite its prominent role in the Syrian conflict for at least the past six years, if not longer, the United States wanted no part of a many-sided summit dedicated to resolving it via negotiation.

A matter of days later came the Trump administration's sweeping new sanctions against Iran, planned for many months and put into force at midnight on Nov. 4.

Never mind Washington's adversaries: Even its traditional allies in Europe are resisting the United States. This new round of sanctions rank among the stupidest foreign policy moves of Trump's two years in office. Two others were withdrawing from the climate pact in June 2017 and unilaterally recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital six months later.

### **Three Things Now Clear**

At this point, three things are clear about the Trump administration's approach to global affairs.

No. 1: Team Trump's foreign policies are easily the most incoherent of any administration in recent memory. The United States does or does not want to settle the Korean question. It does or does not have an even-handed plan for peace in the Mideast. It has or has not abandoned its campaign to depose the Assad government in Damascus. What

appears so on Monday appears otherwise by midweek.

No 2: Time and again, this administration overplays its hand. In case after case it acts on its own, expecting other nations to follow, only to discover that few or none do. Since Trump took office, misjudging U.S. prerogatives may be among the only consistent feature of his foreign policy.

No. 3: "America First" begins to shape up as "America Last" on the foreign policy side. We are a long way from "the indispensable nation," the phrase that Madeleine Albright used for the United States during her time as secretary of state in the Clinton administration. Two years into Trump's presidency, Albright's assertion—which was never more than U.S. hubris at its purest—looks like it might be headed to a museum.

This is not solely due to incompetence in the Trump White House, although this is considerable. The United States has been unable to find its place in a swiftly changing world order at least since the George W. Bush administration. It has consistently mishandled relations with China and Russia from one administration to the next, to take two prominent examples: trans-Atlantic ties with longtime allies (who too often behave like vassals) have deteriorated steadily for years due to Washington's misjudgments.

The Trump administration's confusion merely makes the gravity of our moment more difficult to deny: Absent last century's simplicities—chief among them the binary East-West division—the United States is losing its grip on leading.

**Talk of Withdrawal**

There is much talk in Washington these days of a U.S. withdrawal from global affairs. Ivo Daalder, a former ambassador to NATO and now president of the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, recently co-authored a book, with James Lindsay, called "The Empty Throne: America's Abdication of Global Leadership." It is a long lament about what its title suggests: the United States is surrendering—supposedly—its position as No. 1 among nations.

This is a misreading, perfectly upside down from reality. The United States is not surrendering anything. That is precisely the problem. It refuses to give up its long-asserted right to act unilaterally on the assumption other nations will either fall in line or silently acquiesce.

At the same time, Washington declines to participate in multilateral efforts to resolve wars, competing political or territorial claims, and other such problems via diplomatic negotiation, often with adversaries. This helps explain why the Trump administration repudiated the Paris climate pact and then the accord governing Iran's nuclear programs: Both implicitly demonstrate that multipolarity is an inevitable 21<sup>st</sup> Century reality.

Daalder acknowledged this during a [recent talk](#) at the Council on Foreign Relations, even if he seemed not to have grasped his own lesson. "As the U.S. withdraws," he said, "it's not involved in building coalitions bringing people together to deal with global challenges, people are going to turn to others."

The Istanbul summit on Syria is an excellent case in point. The United States should have been there. South Korea is

another. While President Moon Jae-in has to manage Seoul's traditional ties to Washington delicately, he has unmistakably seized the lead in Northeast Asia and repeatedly signals that he remains committed to a settlement with the North—ultimately with or without U.S. cooperation.

Nostalgia is part of the problem. The world turns, and Washington is lost in a kind of memory palace, where it nurses the desire to prolong those decades of unchallenged primacy that it enjoyed after World War II. It refuses to accept there is no turning back the clock. While it wants to play “follow the leader” other nations drop out of the game.

Vigorous, nearly universal opposition to the new sanctions against Iran, Seoul's determination to press on toward peace on the Korean Peninsula, the summit on Syria in Istanbul: They all make the same point. Washington must abandon its Wilsonian ambition to shape the world in its own image if it is to remain an effective power—as it can and should—in the new global order. The new Iran sanctions already appear to be a turning point in this respect: Donald Trump's Washington thought it could lead, but virtually no one is following.

There is no “abdication” and no new isolationist era in the offing. But until the U.S. accepts the new norms of statecraft in a world of rising powers, we will watch as other nations withdraw from America—a very different thing.

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## The Saudi-US Crisis Will Pass

U.S.-Saudi ties have withstood crises in the past and will withstand this one, says As'ad AbuKhalil.

## ***Washington and Riyadh Have Had Worse***

## ***Crises and Will Survive Khashoggi Murder***

**By As`ad AbuKhalil**

*Special to Consortium News*



Nobody in Washington, Republican or Democrat, welcomes the crisis in U.S.–Saudi relations prompted by the murder in Istanbul of Jamal Khashoggi, a Saudi [defector](#), on October 2. Maintaining good relations with the Saudi royal family has been a high bipartisan priority since President Franklin D. Roosevelt and King Abdul Aziz ibn Saud made their Faustian bargain in 1945: The U.S. would shield the Saudi kingdom's tyranny from criticism in exchange for a share of oil revenues and Riyadh's political loyalty (and American arms sales).

The relationship has continued this way in the decades since—and will still do so. The U.S. has covered up a long history of Saudi crimes and conspiracies; during the Cold War it used the Saudis to spread extremist jihadi ideologies to counter secular Arabs that tilted towards Moscow. More recently, the Saudi regime was not freelancing when it cultivated the likes of Osama bin Laden: He was part of a Saudi-U.S.-Pakistani effort to recruit, arm, and finance fanatical Muslims from around the world to undermine the progressive secular regime in Afghanistan.

If history is any guide, it is highly likely that Washington and Riyadh are collaborating behind the scenes to cover up the truth of the Khashoggi case and preserve the relationship as it has been for the past 85 years.

Beside the current crisis, there have been other dust-ups in the history of U.S.-Saudi relations. The 1973 oil crisis was the most serious, and it nearly undermined the alliance. Back then the Saudi regime couldn't ignore the rising tide of Arab sentiment against U.S. intervention on the side of Israel in the 1973 war.

King Faisal was adamant in discussions with Henry Kissinger, Nixon's secretary of state and national security adviser, that Israel should withdraw from occupied Arab territories in return for lifting the oil embargo. Contrary to his public statements, Faisal hadn't rejected Israel's occupation of Palestine since the 1948 war. Reflecting in part the king's deep anti-Semitism, Faisal only refused to recognize Jewish religious rights in Jerusalem.

When reminded of the significance of the Wailing Wall (*Buraq* Wall for Muslims), he recommended construction of a new wall where Jews "could weep." But Faisal's firm stance didn't last long: New U.S. arms sales were enough to make him abandon his insistence that Israeli withdrawal from the occupied territories was a necessary condition for the restoration of oil sales to the West.

Another crisis arose with the broadcast of the movie "Death of a Princess" in 1980. The British-made film was based on a true story about the beheading of a Saudi princess who fell in love with a

commoner. After the movie was shown in Britain, the Saudi government did not want U.S. television stations to broadcast it. The American oil lobby put enormous pressure on PBS stations around the country not to air it. Very few stations did, and the bilateral relationship was secured.

There were other crises in the relationship in the 1980s between the Saudi government and Congress: Under pressure from the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, Congress opposed arms sales to Saudi Arabia, even as administrations (Democratic and Republican) favored them. AIPAC dropped its objections to weapons sales after the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the establishment of secret contacts between Israel and Gulf countries.

This is the background from which to view the current, relatively minor crisis in comparison. The Khashshogi killing wouldn't have amounted to much if the U.S. mainstream media didn't make a strong case against the Saudi royal family (while suddenly discovering the Saudis' war on Yemen), and if the Turkish government hadn't leaked so many gruesome details about the murder in the Saudi's Istanbul consulate.

### **Trump's Waffles**

The Trump administration—in line with successive U.S. administrations—first tried to minimize the significance of the crime. President Donald Trump typically reminded Americans of the value of arms sales to the Saudi kingdom. But his subsequent statements were inconsistent: First he'd mention \$10 billion in arms sales and then he'd promise to sanction the regime. He even uncharacteristically, for a U.S. president, pledged to let Congress decide on sanctions once an investigation is completed. (Which of several investigations he didn't say.)

It's not a stretch to believe the Trump administration has been working covertly with the Saudis to come up with a coverup story. The Saudi's multiple explanations have been unconvincing from the start. The intent of CIA Director Gina Haspel's trip to Istanbul seemed to be to shield the Saudi regime from the murder and Crown Prince Muhammad

bin Salman's involvement. Haspel may have been behind Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's surprising reluctance to reveal "the naked truth," as he'd promised.

The U.S. almost certainly wanted the Turkish government's raw intelligence to better advise the Saudis on the coverup. After Haspel's meeting with Trump upon her return the Saudis admitted it was premeditated murder.

The U.S. likely mediated between Erdogan and MbS, given the animosity between the Turks and Saudis. Outlines of a deal are emerging. The Saudis now refer to their former occupiers as "sisterly Turkey," though bin Salmon previously included it in the region's "axis of evil." Official Saudi rhetoric has also changed towards Qatar, which the Saudis and their allies have blockaded since last year. MbS and Adel Jubeir, his foreign minister, have made conciliatory statements about Doha in the last few days, something unthinkable a month ago.

Western and Turkish media keeps the Khassoghi story alive. But AIPAC, UAE and Israeli pressure has been exerted on the U.S. not to abandon bin Salman. For Israel, he is the opportunity of a lifetime: a rising Saudi prince in line to be king who is unburdened by political or religious attachment to ditch the Palestinians and continue his hostility toward Iran.

It is to Washington's advantage that MbS has been weakened. He might now abandon his proclivity for adventurism and become a more traditional Saudi despot deferring to DC on key decisions. But that should make him also be more cautious about confronting Iran and endorsing Trump's "deal of the century" for the Palestinians. The U.S. is still capable, though, of maneuvering to replace him if he becomes no longer useful, despite Saudi threats to align itself with China and Russia, or quit its embrace of Israel.

The relationship between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia has survived previous crises. It will survive this one.

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## Despite Saudi Crisis, US Increases Threats Against Iran

Though the U.S.-Saudi alliance may have been weakened because of the Khashoggi murder, both countries are still targeting Iran as new US sanctions are announced on Sunday, writes Marjorie Cohn of Truthout.

**By Marjorie Cohn**

*Truthout*



The alleged torture, murder and dismemberment of [journalist Jamal Khashoggi](#), widely believed to have been carried out on orders of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, may put a crimp in Donald Trump's plans to escalate his aggression against Iran.

Saudi Arabia, the United States and Israel are unified in their hatred of Iran, albeit with different motives. Iran has been in the crosshairs of the United States since the 1979 Iranian Revolution overthrew the vicious, US-installed puppet Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi; indeed, in 2002, George W. Bush initiated Iran into his "axis of evil." Saudi Arabia, home to the two holiest Muslim sites, sees Shiite Iran as a rival for regional hegemony. And Israel considers Iran an "[existential threat](#)."

"Trump administration officials and outside experts said that possible repercussions on an elaborate plan to squeeze the Iranians have dominated

internal discussions about the fallout over what happened to Mr. Khashoggi," David Sanger reported in *The New York Times*.

The allegations against the Saudi crown prince "have already had an effect" on Israel, "effectively freezing the push to build an international coalition against Iran's regional influence, the top priority for Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu," Ben Hubbard and David Halbfinger, citing "analysts," wrote in the *Times*.

White House officials are worried the mushrooming crisis with Saudi Arabia could "derail a showdown with Iran and jeopardize plans to enlist Saudi help to avoid disrupting the oil market."

### **Trump Still Ramps It Up**

Following the dangerous and foolhardy withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal – the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) – which pleased Israel and Saudi Arabia, the Trump administration is slated to announce on Sunday that companies doing business with Iran – including purchasing oil or making investments in the country – will be forbidden from doing business in the United States. The imposition of these punishing sanctions are intended to result in a full embargo of Iran's oil.

Trump will need Saudi military and political cooperation if, "as threatened," Iran retaliates against his oil embargo by taking "reciprocal, physical action to halt Saudi and Gulf states' oil exports via the Strait of Hormuz in the Gulf and the Bab-el-Mandeb strait, at the mouth of the Red Sea," Simon Tisdall noted in *The Guardian*. "If this crisis point is reached, escalating confrontations across the region cannot be ruled out."

The Trump administration is relying on Saudi Arabia to pump extra oil once Iran is out of the market. But Congress is considering whether to punish Saudi Arabia for the Khashoggi case.

"To penalize what the Saudis care about most – oil revenue – would be to undercut the Iran policy and send the price of gasoline and heating oil significantly higher, just as winter approaches," Sanger noted.

Richard N. Haass, president of the Council on Foreign Relations, told the *Times*, "It's a neat trick if you both sanction a country and partner with them at the same time," adding, "it's not easy to keep the focus on Iran's behavior when the Saudis are doing terrible things to journalists and dissidents, and bombing children in Yemen."

The Khashoggi murder has shone a spotlight on the commission of Saudi war crimes

in Yemen, aided and abetted by the United States. In a *New York Times* opinion piece, Sen. Bernie Sanders called for ending US military support to Saudi Arabia. But Sanger cited administration sources as saying, “the issue of limiting American arms sales to Saudi Arabia, which Mr. Trump has said would threaten American jobs, pales in importance [to the plan to squeeze Iran].”

Meanwhile, Trump continues to rattle the sabers at Iran.

## **Taliban Targeted**

On Oct. 23, the Terrorist Financing Targeting Center, comprised of the United States, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman and Qatar, designated nine individuals “associated with the Taliban,” some of whom have “Iranian sponsors.” A Bush-era executive order authorizes the Office of Foreign Assets Control to block the assets of anyone or any group designated as a terrorist.

Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin announced the terrorism designations in a press release, stating that the United States is “targeting key Iranian sponsors providing financial and material support to the Taliban.” He added, “Iran’s support to the Taliban stands in stark violation of the United Nations Security Council Resolutions and epitomizes the regime’s utter disregard for fundamental international norms.”

In a May speech, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said the United States would “crush” Iran with new sanctions so severe that regime change could result.

Moreover, on Oct. 5, the White House released its long-awaited 25-page counterterrorism strategy, which calls Iran “the most prominent state sponsor of terrorism.” It pledges to fight Iran and “radical Islamist” militants to eliminate the terror threat against the United States.

In fact, Iran has not used aggressive military force against a hostile neighbor for more than 200 years. Curiously, the new U.S. counterterrorism strategy fails to identify Saudi Arabia, which is targeting civilians and killing thousands of them in Yemen (and backing extremists in Syria and elsewhere), as a terrorist threat.

Eric Margolis, a veteran war correspondent in the Middle East, reported in July that the Pentagon has prepared plans for an air attack on Iran:

The Pentagon has planned a high-intensity air war against Iran that Israel and the Saudis might very well join. The plan calls for over 2,300 air strikes against Iranian strategic targets: airfields and naval bases, arms and

petroleum, oil and lubricant depots, telecommunication nodes, radar, factories, military headquarters, ports, water works, airports, missile bases and units of the Revolutionary Guards.

The National Coalition to Prevent an Iranian Nuclear Weapon, a group of more than 50 prominent foreign policy experts, released a statement saying, "The Trump Administration's Iran strategy is to assert maximum economic, political and military pressure to change Iran's behavior and threaten, if not cause, collapse of the regime." That strategy, they added, "has left Iran the option of either capitulation or war."

Many in Congress are worried that Trump may be gunning for Iran. They are trying to prevent him from mounting a preemptive strike.

### **Will Congress Stop an Attack?**

On Sept. 28, Sen. Tom Udall (D-NM), joined by Senators Patrick Leahy (D-VT), Dianne Feinstein (D-CA), Richard Durbin (D-IL), Bernie Sanders (I-VT), Jeff Merkley (D-OR), Martin Heinrich (D-NM) and Chris Murphy (D-CT), introduced the Prevention of Unconstitutional War with Iran Act of 2018. It would prohibit the United States from appropriating money that could lead to war with Iran unless Congress expressly approves. The legislation makes clear that a preemptive attack on Iran would be illegal under the War Powers Act and the US Constitution.

The Udall bill notes that "the International Atomic Energy Agency repeatedly verified that Iran has continued to comply with its nuclear-related obligations under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action." US noncompliance with the JCPOA, the bill continues, "risks an unnecessary conflagration with Iran through the use of sanctions against both allies and adversaries in the region and throughout the world, absent a clear diplomatic path for resolving the crisis." The bill quotes Trump's tweet that Iran "[w]ill suffer consequences the likes of which few throughout history have ever suffered before."

Congress explicitly provided in the National Defense Authorization Act of 2019, "Nothing in this Act may be construed to authorize the use of force against Iran or North Korea."

In April, a bipartisan bill to replace the 2001 Authorization for the Use of Force (AUMF) was introduced in the Senate and is currently pending in the Foreign Relations Committee. The proposed bill would allow the president "to use all necessary and appropriate force" against Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen, Libya and Somalia, al-Qaeda, ISIS (also known as Daesh), the Taliban and their "associated forces." But by its terms, "associated forces" specifically excludes

“a sovereign nation.” So, the new AUMF would not cover Iran.

That wouldn't stop Trump from purporting to rely on the 2001 AUMF to attack Iran, however. Although specifically limited to those responsible for 9/11, Bush, Obama and Trump have all used it to justify at least 37 military operations, many of them unrelated to 9/11.

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## New Iran Sanctions Risk Long-term US Isolation

The U.S. is going for the jugular with new Iran sanctions intended to punish those who trade with Teheran. But the U.S. may have a fight on its hands in a possible post- WWII turning-point, writes Patrick Lawrence.

# New Iran Sanctions Risks Long-term US Isolation

## Europe, Asia May Rebel Against US Penalties

By Patrick Lawrence

*Special to Consortium News*



The next step in the Trump administration's “maximum pressure” campaign against Iran comes this Sunday, Nov. 4, when the most severe sanctions will be imposed on the Islamic Republic. Crucially, they apply not only to Iran but to anyone who continues to do business with it.

It's not yet clear how disruptive this move will be. While the U.S. intention is to isolate Iran, it is the U.S. that could wind up being more isolated. It depends on the rest of the world's reaction, and especially Europe's.

The issue is so fraught that disputes over how to apply the new sanctions have even divided Trump administration officials.

The administration is going for the jugular this time. It wants to force Iranian exports of oil and petrochemical products down to as close to zero as possible. As the measures are now written, they also exclude Iran from the global interbank system known as SWIFT.

It is hard to say which of these sanctions is more severe. Iran's oil exports have already started falling. They peaked at 2.7 million barrels a day last May—just before Donald Trump pulled the U.S. out of the six-nation accord governing Iran's nuclear programs. By early September oil exports were averaging a million barrels a day less.

In August the U.S. barred Iran's purchases of U.S.-dollar denominated American and foreign company aircraft and auto parts. Since then the Iranian rial has crashed to record lows and inflation has risen above 30 percent.

Revoking Iran's SWIFT privileges will effectively cut the nation out of the dollar-denominated global economy. But there are moves afoot, especially by China and Russia, to move away from a dollar-based economy.

The SWIFT issue has caused infighting in the administration between Treasury Secretary Mnuchin and John Bolton, Trump's national security adviser who is among the most vigorous Iran hawks in the White House. Mnuchin might win a temporary delay or exclusions for a few Iranian financial institutions, but probably not much more.

On Sunday, the second round of sanctions will kick in since Trump withdrew the U.S. from the 2015 Obama administration-backed, nuclear agreement, which lifted sanctions on Iran in exchange for stringent controls on its nuclear program. The International Atomic Energy Agency has repeatedly certified that the deal is working and the other signatories—Britain, China, France, Germany and Russia have not pulled out and have resumed trading with Iran. China and Russia have already said they will ignore American threats to sanction it for continuing economic relations with Iran. The key question is what will America's European allies do?

## **Europeans React**

Europe has been unsettled since Trump withdrew in May from the nuclear accord.

The European Union is developing a trading mechanism to get around U.S. sanctions. Known as a Special Purpose Vehicle, it would allow European companies to use a barter system similar to how Western Europe traded with the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

EU officials have also been lobbying to preserve Iran's access to global interbank operations by excluding the revocation of SWIFT privileges from Trump's list of sanctions. They count Mnuchin, who is eager to preserve U.S. influence in the global trading system, among their allies. Some European officials, including Jean-Claude Juncker, president of the European Commission, propose making the euro a global trading currency to compete with the dollar.

Except for Charles de Gaulle briefly pulling France out of NATO in 1967 and Germany and France voting on the UN Security Council against the U.S. invading Iraq in 2003, European nations have been subordinate to the U.S. since the end of the Second World War.

The big European oil companies, unwilling to risk the threat of U.S. sanctions, have already signaled they intend to ignore the EU's new trade mechanism. Total SA, the French petroleum company and one of Europe's biggest, pulled out of its Iran operations several months ago.

Earlier this month a U.S. official confidently predicted there would be little demand among European corporations for the proposed barter mechanism.

Whether Europe succeeds in efforts to defy the U.S. on Iran is nearly beside the point from a long-term perspective. Trans-Atlantic damage has already been done. A rift that began to widen during the Obama administration seems about to get wider still.

## **Asia Reacts**

Asian nations are also exhibiting resistance to the impending U.S. sanctions. It is unlikely they could absorb all the exports Iran will lose after Nov. 4, but they could make a significant difference. China, India, and South Korea are the first, second, and third-largest importers of Iranian crude; Japan is sixth. Asian nations may also try to work around the U.S. sanctions regime after Nov. 4.

India is considering purchases of Iranian crude via a barter system or denominating transactions in rupees. China, having already said it would ignore the U.S. threat, would like nothing better than to expand yuan-denominated oil trading, and this is not a hard call: It is in a protracted trade war with the U.S., and an oil-futures market launched in Shanghai last spring already claims roughly 14 percent of the global market for "front-month" futures—contracts

covering shipments closest to delivery.

As with most of the Trump administration's foreign policies, we won't know how the new sanctions will work until they are introduced. There could be waivers for nations such as India; Japan is on record asking for one. The E.U.'s Special Purpose Vehicle could prove at least a modest success at best, but this remains uncertain. Nobody is sure who will win the administration's internal argument over SWIFT.

### **Long-term Consequences for the U.S.**

The de-dollarization of the global economy is gradually gathering momentum. The orthodox wisdom in the markets has long been that competition with the dollar from other currencies will eventually prove a reality, but it will not be one to arrive in our lifetimes. But with European and Asian reactions to the imminent sanctions against Iran it could come sooner than previously thought.

The coalescing of emerging powers into a non-Western alliance –most significantly China, Russia, India, and Iran–starts to look like another medium-term reality. This is driven by practical rather than ideological considerations, and the U.S. could not do more to encourage this if it tried. When Washington withdrew from the Iran accord, Moscow and Beijing immediately pledged to support Tehran by staying with its terms. If the U.S. meets significant resistance, especially from its allies, it could be a turning-point in post-World War II U.S. dominance.

### **Supposedly Intended for New Talks**

All this is intended to force Iran back to the negotiating table for a rewrite of what Trump often calls “the worst deal ever.” Tehran has made it clear countless times it has no intention of reopening the pact, given that it has consistently adhered to its terms and that the other signatories to the deal are still abiding by it.

The U.S. may be drastically overplaying its hand and could pay the price with additional international isolation that has worsened since Trump took office.

Washington has been on a sanctions binge for years. Those about to take effect seem recklessly broad. This time, the U.S. risks lasting alienation even from those allies that have traditionally been its closest.

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## Why the U.S. Seeks to Hem in Russia, China and Iran

America's three principal adversaries signify the shape of the world to come: a post-Western world of coexistence. But neoliberal and neocon ideology is unable to to accept global pluralism and multipolarity, argues Patrick Lawrence.

**By Patrick Lawrence**

*Special to Consortium News*



The Trump administration has brought U.S. foreign policy to the brink of crisis, if it has not already tipped into one. There is little room to argue otherwise. In Asia, Europe, and the Middle East, and in Washington's ever-fraught relations with Russia, U.S. strategy, as reviewed in [my previous column](#), amounts to little more than spoiling the efforts of others to negotiate peaceful solutions to war and dangerous standoffs in the interests of an orderly world.

The bitter reality is that U.S. foreign policy has no definable objective other than blocking the initiatives of others because they stand in the way of the further expansion of U.S. global interests. This impoverished strategy reflects Washington's refusal to accept the passing of its relatively brief post-Cold War moment of unipolar power.

There is an error all too common in American public opinion. Personalizing Washington's regression into the role of spoiler by assigning all blame to one man, now Donald Trump, deprives one of deeper understanding. This mistake was made during the steady attack on civil liberties after the Sept. 11 tragedies and then during the 2003 invasion of Iraq: namely that it was all George W. Bush's fault. It was not so simple then and is not now. The crisis of U.S. foreign policy—a series of radical missteps—are systemic. Having little to do with personalities, they pass from one administration to the next with little

variance other than at the margins.

Let us bring some history to this question of America as spoiler. What is the origin of this undignified and isolating approach to global affairs?

It began with that hubristic triumphalism so evident in the decade after the Cold War's end. What ensued had various names.

There was the "end of history" thesis. American liberalism was humanity's highest achievement, and nothing would supersede it.

There was also the "Washington consensus." The world was in agreement that free-market capitalism and unfettered financial markets would see the entire planet to prosperity. The consensus never extended far beyond the Potomac, but this sort of detail mattered little at the time.

The neoliberal economic crusade accompanied by neoconservative politics had its intellectual ballast, and off went its true-believing warriors around the world.

Failures ensued. Iraq post-2003 is among the more obvious. Nobody ever planted democracy or built free markets in Baghdad. Then came the "color revolutions," which resulted in the destabilization of large swathes of the former Soviet Union's borderlands. The 2008 financial crash followed.

I was in Hong Kong at the time and recall thinking, "This is not just Lehman Brothers. An economic model is headed into Chapter 11." One would have thought a fundamental rethink in Washington might have followed these events. There has never been one.

The orthodoxy today remains what it was when it formed in the 1990s: The neoliberal crusade must proceed. Our market-driven, "rules-based" order is still advanced as the only way out of our planet's impasses.

### **A Strategic and Military Turn**

Midway through the first Obama administration, a crucial turn began. What had been an assertion of financial and economic power, albeit coercive in many instances, particularly with the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, took on further strategic and military dimensions. The NATO bombing campaign in Libya, ostensibly a humanitarian mission, became a regime-change operation—despite Washington's promises otherwise. Obama's "pivot to Asia" turned out to be a neo-containment policy toward China. The "reset" with Russia, declared after Obama appointed Hillary Clinton secretary of state, flopped and turned into the virulent animosity we now live with daily. The U.S.-cultivated coup in Kiev in 2014 was a major declaration of drastic turn in policy towards Moscow. So was

the decision, taken in 2012 at the latest, to back the radical jihadists who were turning civil unrest in Syria into a campaign to topple the Assad government in favor of another Islamist regime.

Spoilage as a poor excuse for a foreign policy had made its first appearances.

I count 2013 to 2015 as key years. At the start of this period, China began developing what it now calls its Belt and Road Initiative—its hugely ambitious plan to stitch together the Eurasian landmass, Shanghai to Lisbon. Moscow favored this undertaking, not least because of the key role Russia had to play and because it fit well with President Vladimir Putin's Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), launched in 2014.

In 2015, the last of the three years I just noted, Russia intervened militarily and diplomatically in the Syria conflict, in part to protect its southwest from Islamist extremism and in part to pull the Middle East back from the near-anarchy then threatening it as well as Russia and the West.

Meanwhile, Washington had cast China as an adversary and committed itself—as it apparently remains—to regime change in Syria. Three months prior to the treaty that established the EAEU, the Americans helped turn another case of civil unrest into a regime change—this time backing not jihadists in Syria but the crypto-Nazi militias in Ukraine on which the government now in power still depends.

That is how we got the U.S.-as-spoiler foreign policy we now have.

If there is a president to blame—and again, I see little point in this line of argument—it would have to be Barack Obama. To a certain extent, Obama was a creature of those around him, as he acknowledged in his interview with Jeffrey Goldberg in *The Atlantic* toward the end of his second term. From that “Anonymous” opinion piece published in *The New York Times* on Sept. 5, we know Trump is too, to a greater extent than Obama may have feared in his worst moments.

The crucial question is why. Why do U.S. policy cliques find themselves bereft of imaginative thinking in the face of an evolving world order? Why has there been not a single original policy initiative since the years I single out, with the exception of the now-abandoned 2015 accord governing Iran's nuclear programs? “Right now, our job is to create quagmires until we get what we want,” an administration official told *The Washington Post's* David Ignatius in August.

Can you think of a blunter confession of intellectual bankruptcy? I can't.

**Global 'Equals' Like Us?**

There is a longstanding explanation for this paralysis. Seven decades of global hegemony, the Cold War notwithstanding, left the State Department with little to think about other than the simplicities of East-West tension. Those planning and executing American diplomacy lost all facility for imaginative thinking because there was no need of it. This holds true, in my view, but there is more to our specific moment than mere sclerosis within the policy cliques.

As I have argued numerous times elsewhere, parity between East and West is a 21st century imperative. From Woodrow Wilson to the post-World War II settlement, an equality among all nations was in theory what the U.S. considered essential to global order.

Now that this is upon us, however, Washington cannot accept it. It did not count on non-Western nations achieving a measure of prosperity and influence until they were “just like us,” as the once famous phrase had it. And it has not turned out that way.

Think of Russia, China, and Iran, the three nations now designated America’s principal adversaries. Each one is fated to become (if it is not already) a world or regional power and a key to stability—Russia and China on a global scale, Iran in the Middle East. But each stands resolutely—and this is not to say with hostile intent—outside the Western-led order. They have different histories, traditions, cultures, and political cultures. And they are determined to preserve them.

They signify the shape of the world to come—a post-Western world in which the Atlantic alliance must coexist with rising powers outside its orbit. Together, then, they signify precisely what the U.S. cannot countenance. And if there is one attribute of neoliberal and neoconservative ideology that stands out among all others, it is its complete inability to accept difference or deviation if it threatens its interests.

This is the logic of spoilage as a substitute for foreign policy. Among its many consequences are countless lost opportunities for global stability.

**Patrick Lawrence, a correspondent abroad for many years, chiefly for the International Herald Tribune, is a columnist, essayist, author, and lecturer. His most recent book is *Time No Longer: Americans After the American Century* (Yale). Follow him @thefloutist. His web site is [www.patricklawrence.us](http://www.patricklawrence.us). Support his work via [www.patreon.com/thefloutist](http://www.patreon.com/thefloutist).**

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## VIPS to Trump: Intel on Iran Could be CATASTROPHIC

As drums beat again for war – this time on Iran--the VIPS' warning is again being disregarded as it was before the Iraq debacle and this time VIPS fear the consequences will be all-caps CATASTROPHIC.

August 1, 2018

**MEMORANDUM FOR:** The President

**FROM:** Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS)

**SUBJECT:** Intelligence on Iran Fails the Smell Test

Mr. President:

As the George W. Bush administration revved up to attack Iraq 15 years ago, we could see no compelling reason for war. We decided, though, to give President Bush the benefit of the doubt on the chance he had been sandbagged by Vice President Dick Cheney and others. We chose to allow for the possibility that he actually believed the “intelligence” that Colin Powell presented to the UN as providing “irrefutable and undeniable” proof of WMD in Iraq and a “sinister nexus” between Saddam Hussein and al Qaeda.

To us in VIPS it was clear, however, that the “intelligence” Powell adduced was bogus. Thus, that same afternoon (Feb. 5, 2003) we prepared and sent to President Bush a Memorandum like this [one](#), urging him to seek counsel beyond the “circle of those advisers clearly bent on a war for which we see no compelling reason and from which we believe the unintended consequences are likely to be catastrophic.”

We take no satisfaction at having been correct – though disregarded – in predicting the political and humanitarian disaster in Iraq. Most Americans have been told the intelligence was “mistaken.” It was not; it was out-and-out fraud, in which, sadly, some of our former colleagues took part.

Five years after Powell’s speech, the Chair of the Senate Intelligence Committee minced few words in announcing the main bipartisan finding of a five-year investigation. He said: “In making the case for war, the Administration repeatedly presented intelligence as fact when in reality it was unsubstantiated, contradicted, or even non-existent. As a result, the American people were led to believe that the threat from Iraq was much greater than actually existed.”

### **Iran Now in Gunsight**

As drums beat again for a military attack – this time on Iran, we Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity and other experienced, objective analysts are, by all appearances, being disregarded again. And, this time, we fear the consequences will be all-caps CATASTROPHIC – in comparison with the catastrophe of Iraq.

In memoranda to you over the past year and a half we have pointed out that (1) Iran’s current support for international terrorism is far short of what it was decades ago; and (2) that you are being played by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s claims about Iran: they are based on intelligence exposed as fraudulent several years ago. Tellingly, Netanyahu waited for your new national security adviser to be in place for three weeks before performing his April 30 slide show alleging that Iran has a covert nuclear weapons program. On the chance that our analysis of Netanyahu’s show-and-tell failed to reach you, please know that the Israeli prime minister was recycling information from proven forgeries, which we reported in a Memorandum to you early last spring.

If our Memorandum of May 7 fell through some cracks in the West Wing, here are its main findings:

The evidence displayed by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu

on April 30 in what he called his “Iranian atomic archive” showed blatant signs of fabrication. That evidence is linked to documents presented by the Bush Administration more than a decade earlier as “proof” of a covert Iran nuclear weapons program. Those documents were clearly fabricated, as well.

In our May 7, 2018 Memorandum we also asserted: “We can prove that the actual documents originally came not from Iran but from Israel. Moreover, the documents were never authenticated by the CIA or the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).”

### **Iran: Almost Targeted in 2008**

There was a close brush with war with Iran a decade ago. Bush and Cheney, in close consultation with Israel, were planning to attack Iran in 2008, their last year in office. Fortunately, an honest National Intelligence Estimate of November 2007 concluded that Iran had stopped working on a nuclear weapon in 2003, and that key judgment was made public. Abruptly, that NIE stuck an iron rod into the wheels of the juggernaut then speeding downhill to war.

The key judgment that Iran had stopped work on a nuclear weapon was the result of the painstakingly deliberative process that was customarily used, back in the day, to produce an NIE. After that process – which took a full year – the Nov. 2007 NIE was approved unanimously by all U.S. intelligence agencies.

(In other words, it was decidedly NOT a rump “assessment” like the one cobbled together in a couple of weeks by “handpicked” analysts from three selected, agenda-laden agencies regarding Russian meddling. We refer, of course, to the evidence-impoverished and deceptively labeled “Intelligence Community Assessment” that the directors of the FBI, CIA, and NSA gave you on January 6, 2017. The Defense Intelligence Agency and the State Department intelligence bureau were among the other 13 agencies excluded from that “Intelligence Community Assessment.”)

As for the Bush/Cheney plans for attacking Iran in 2008, President George W. Bush, in his autobiography, *Decision Points*, recorded his

chagrin at what he called the NIE's "eye-popping" intelligence finding debunking the conventional wisdom that Iran was on the verge of getting a nuclear weapon. Bush added plaintively, "How could I possibly explain using the military to destroy the nuclear facilities of a country the intelligence community said had no active nuclear weapons program?"

Mr. President, we do not know whether a fresh National Intelligence Estimate has been produced on Iran and nuclear weapons – or, if one has been produced, whether it is as honest as the NIE of Nov. 2007, which helped prevent the launch of another unnecessary war the following year. We stand on our record. In sum, if you believe that there is credible evidence that Iran has an active secret nuclear weapons program, we believe you have been misled. And if you base decisions on misleading "intelligence" on Iran, the inevitable result will be a great deal worse than the Bush/Cheney debacle in Iraq.

For the Steering Group

*Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity*

**William Binney**, former NSA Technical Director for World Geopolitical & Military Analysis; Co-founder of NSA's Signals Intelligence Automation Research Center (ret.)

**Sen. Richard H. Black**, 13th District of Virginia; Colonel US Army (ret.); former Chief, Criminal Law Division, Office of the Judge Advocate General, Pentagon (associate VIPS)

**Marshal Carter-Tripp**, Foreign Service Officer (ret.) and Division Director, State Department Bureau of Intelligence and Research

**Kathleen Christison**, Senior Analyst on Middle East, CIA (ret.)

**Bogdan Dzakovic**, former Team Leader of Federal Air Marshals and Red Team, FAA Security (ret.) (associate VIPS)

**Philip Giraldi**, CIA, Operations Officer (ret.)

**Larry C. Johnson**, former CIA and State Department Counter-terrorism officer

**Michael S. Kearns**, Captain, USAF (ret.); Wing Commander, RAAF (ret.); Intelligence Officer & ex-Master SERE Instructor

**Linda Lewis**, WMD preparedness policy analyst, USDA (ret.) (associate VIPS)

**Edward Loomis**, NSA Cryptologic Computer Scientist (ret.)

**David MacMichael**, Capt., USMC (ret.); former Senior Estimates Officer, National Intelligence Council

**Ray McGovern**, former US Army Infantry/Intelligence Officer & CIA analyst; CIA Presidential briefer (ret.)

**Elizabeth Murray**, former Deputy National Intelligence Officer for the Near East, National Intelligence Council & CIA political analyst (ret.)

**Todd E. Pierce**, MAJ, US Army Judge Advocate (ret.)

**Scott Ritter**, former MAJ., USMC; former UN Weapons Inspector, Iraq

**Coleen Rowley**, FBI Special Agent and former Minneapolis Division Legal Counsel (ret.)

**Sarah G. Wilton**, Intelligence Officer, DIA (ret.); Commander, US Naval Reserve (ret.)

**Robert Wing**, former Foreign Service Officer (associate VIPS)

**Ann Wright, Colonel**, US Army (ret.); Foreign Service Officer (resigned in opposition to the war on Iraq)

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