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TRUMP'S FOREIGN POLICY FOR THE MIDDLE EAST: AN ACE OR A DEUCE?

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JCSP 43

Exercise Solo Flight

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TRUMP'S FOREIGN POLICY FOR THE MIDDLE EAST: AN ACE OR A DEUCE?

The manner in which the Trump administration achieves its foreign policy goals in the Middle East can have effects on the region's stability. The Trump administration may challenge, if not totally overhaul, historical American Middle Eastern foreign policies, potentially negating decades-worth of diplomatic successes achieved through former Presidential administrations. The "Brexit" shows that past interpretations of globalization may be changing, and President Trump's style so far has shown that perhaps his views of globalization may also differ from his predecessor's, thus affecting his views on U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East.

This paper will demonstrate that the Trump administration is departing from the previous rhetoric by not having set a formal foreign policy agenda regarding the Middle East.

This will be demonstrated by looking into President Trump's realist approach, his separation from the historical U.S. bipartisan foreign policy structure, his inclination to renegotiate the Iran nuclear deal, and his personal leadership style, will shape the future of the region's volatile security dynamics.

President Trump the Realist

Realism in politics, as described by Mohammed Ayoob, can be resumed as, "...treating states as unitary actors primarily concerned with assuring their safety from external threats."¹ President Trump's core message was centered on America as a State. His vision is one based on national interests or *raison d'état*. Making the U.S. a strong, free and prosperous State, reached the sensitive chords of many Americans, and spoke of changes to ensure that the American worker's jobs and personal security is the President's prime concern. During his election

¹ Mohamed Ayoob, "Defining Security: A Subaltern Realist Perspective", *Critical Securities Studies*, ed. Keith Krause and Michael C. Williams (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997): 122.

campaign and inaugural address, the President of the United States (POTUS) regularly spoke about a foreign policy that focuses on American interests, which contradicts preceding U.S. Presidents who spoke of projecting American values through their foreign policies.² The catchy phrase “Making America great again” used during the Presidential elections, is now the slogan for President Trump’s American unity movement.³ President Trump revealed his realist penchant in his approach not only to American policy, but undeniably towards his views on foreign policy, as both approaches must go hand-in-hand in his realist paradigm.

It is not this paper’s intention to suggest that past U.S. President’s didn’t hold the nation’s best interests at heart, but President Trump was quick to articulate to voters that the past imperialist predilection of projecting America’s values throughout the globe wasn’t the way forward for his administration. During his speech on foreign policy, he said, “It all began with the dangerous idea that we could make Western democracies out of countries that had no experience or interest in becoming a Western Democracy.”⁴ He also stated that past Presidents lacked clarity in their foreign policy goals, and acted with randomness vice purpose, “We’re going to finally have a coherent foreign policy based upon American interests, and the shared interests of our allies.”⁵

Renowned political scientist and author John J. Mearsheimer agrees that the Trump Administration would be better served by adopting a realist approach to its foreign policy in today’s environment.⁶ He continues by declaring that,

² Srdja Trifkovic, “Trump’s realist vision,” *Chronicles magazine*, (Jan, 2017), <https://www.chroniclesmagazine.org/trumps-realist-vision/>.

³ Donald J. Trump, last accessed April 25th 2017, <https://www.donaldjtrump.com/>.

⁴ Donald J. Trump, last accessed April 25th 2017, <https://www.donaldjtrump.com/press-releases/donald-j.-trump-foreign-policy-speech>.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ John J. Mearsheimer, “Donald Trump should embrace a realist foreign policy,” *The National Interest*, (Nov, 2016), <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/donald-trump-should-embrace-realist-foreign-policy-18502>.

“The United States has worked to topple regimes and promote democracy in six countries in the greater Middle East: Afghanistan, Egypt, Iraq, Libya, Syria and Yemen. Each attempt has been an abject failure: wars are raging in every one of those countries except Egypt, which is once again a military dictatorship.”⁷

An article written by Thomas Wright in *Politico* magazine evaluates Trump’s international knowledge and comments,

“...he has a remarkably coherent and consistent worldview, one that is unlikely to change much if he’s elected president. It is also a worldview that makes a great leap backward in history, embracing antiquated notions of power that haven’t been prevalent since prior to World War II.”⁸

President Trump’s realist approach to foreign policy means that he will now concentrate his administration’s efforts on looking at U.S. foreign policy through realist’s lens. This in turn means that the U.S. will be looking at what the implications are of their; international diplomatic relationships; economic decisions; and military engagements, and what benefits the American State first, and its allies second. President Trump is not turning his back on the past American successes, but directly blames the past administrations for the chaos that he feels he has inherited now that he is President, as those past decisions were not based on his realist views. He is, however, a businessman and seems to approach foreign policy in the same manner, as he demonstrated from his comments regarding oil in post-war Iraq,

“Now I would say knock the hell out of the oil and do it because it’s a primary source of money for ISIS... Well now, we have to destroy the oil. We should’ve taken it and we would’ve have it. Now we have to destroy the oil. We don’t do it, I just can’t believe we don’t do it.”⁹

Not everyone shares the belief that President Trump is a realist. Robert D. Kaplan is a well-respected political author and senior fellow at the Center for a New American Security. As

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Thomas Wright, “Trump’s 19th Century Foreign Policy,” *Politico Magazine*, (Jan, 2016), <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/01/donald-trump-foreign-policy-213546?paginate=false>.

⁹ Donald J. Trump, interview by Maggie Haberman and David E. Sanger, 26 March 2016, “Transcript: Donald Trump Expounds on His Foreign Policy Views,” *New York Times*, NY. https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/27/us/politics/donald-trump-transcript.html?_r=1.

a self-proclaimed realist, he warns about the possible consequences that the current administration's foreign policy may bring following the U.S. election.¹⁰ Kaplan carries-on to explain that President Trump is no realist as he lacks understanding of the tragic, which he explains as a state of understanding what can go wrong with foreign policy based on historical knowledge, and the required cautiousness in moving forward.¹¹ Kaplan continues with the argument that President Trump lacks the academic historical knowledge of America's past regarding international foreign policy, and his predilection for alternative facts make him naive in his approach to international relations.¹² Kaplan agrees with the realist notion that states place internal interests before international ones, but regarding Trump, his emotions seep through his comments in his article, "Realists know that national interest comes before any global interest. But realists, too, at least the respectable kind, harbor an internationalist vision."¹³

Although Robert D. Kaplan and John J. Mearsheimer share similar views regarding realism, Kaplan's personal appreciation of President Trump's ability to be a realist regarding foreign policy comes across as being prejudiced. His article in the Washington Post, *On Foreign Policy, Donald Trump is no Realist*, clearly lets the reader know where his opinions lie regarding President Trump. He does not make a convincing argument to counter Mearsheimer's assessment of Trump as a realist, nor does it coincide with Thomas Wright's assessment of President Trump's knowledge about international relations and America's history. As such, contrary to Kaplan, this paper supports the idea that President Trump is a realist.

¹⁰ Robert Kaplan, "On Foreign Policy, Donald Trump is no Realist," *The Washington Post*, (Nov, 2016), https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/on-foreign-policy-donald-trump-is-a-fake-realist/2016/11/11/c5fdcc52-a783-11e6-8042-f4d111c862d1_story.html?utm_term=.cfe886660006.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

Obama, Trump and the Middle East

In his pre-election speech on critical foreign policy on April 27th 2016, Trump pledged to rid the planet of ISIS, and to stabilize the Middle-Eastern region by means other than nation-building.¹⁴ The *America First Foreign policy*, which has been released from the White House in January 2017, speaks of "...in pursuing a foreign policy based on American interests, we will embrace diplomacy. The world must know that we do not go abroad in search of enemies, that we are always happy when old enemies become friends, and when old friends become allies."¹⁵

When we compare the Trump Administration's current information regarding its administration's foreign policy to that the Obama-Biden Foreign Policy Agenda of January 2009 regarding the Middle East, we can see that the Obama administration had clear, precise goals regarding Middle-Eastern countries such as Iran, Israel, Afghanistan and Pakistan.¹⁶ That being said, the Obama-Biden foreign policy was in-line with the historic U.S. bipartisan views of American hegemony. As professor of international studies, Joel Migdal explained, "The definition of U.S. interests in the Middle East has been relatively stable over the last 60 years, despite significant global and structural changes."¹⁷ Many political analysts and scholars such as Harvard's professor Stephen M. Walt believe that it is time for American foreign policy to evolve away from its hegemonic origins.¹⁸ According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, hegemony

¹⁴ Donald J. Trump, last accessed 25 April 2017, <https://www.donaldjtrump.com/press-releases/donald-j.-trump-delivers-major-foreign-policy-address>.

¹⁵ The White House, "America First Foreign Policy ," <https://www.whitehouse.gov/america-first-foreign-policy>.

¹⁶ Council on Foreign Relations, "Obama-Biden Foreign Policy Agenda, January 2009," last modified 21 January 2009, <http://www.cfr.org/world/obama-biden-foreign-policy-agenda-january-2009/p18307>.

¹⁷ Joel Migdal, *Shifting Sands: The United States in the Middle East* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 124-125.

¹⁸ Stephen M. Walt, "Barrack Obama was a Foreign Policy Failure", *Foreign Policy*, (Jan, 2017), <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/01/18/barack-obama-was-a-foreign-policy-failure/>.

is "...the dominance of one group over another, often supported by legitimating norms and ideas."¹⁹ The definition includes an example of hegemonic state,

"...the presence of a hegemon (say, the United States after 1945) generates patterns of stability within the international system. The hegemon has a self-interest in the preservation of the system and is, therefore, prepared to underwrite the system's security with its military might."²⁰

Renowned author and U.S. diplomat, Richard Haass, believes that the U.S. should act as an international sheriff in order to assure that their goals are being met through the shaping of the international security environment, which includes the Middle Eastern region.²¹ He also sees the U.S. as essentially the regional power in the Middle East, and one example he uses is the U.S.'s intervention supporting Israel following the 1991 Iraq missile attack in Tel Aviv.²² American journalist and author John Judis argues that President Obama missed a golden opportunity to change the U.S.'s historic foreign policy of seeking unilateral hegemony, "The crisis of 2008-2009 was the ideal moment to abandon the failed strategy of liberal hegemony that the United States had been pursuing since the end of the Cold War, but in the end Obama never broke with that familiar but failed approach."²³ Ulson Gunnar, an American geopolitical analyst and writer explains that the historic U.S. foreign policy inclination can be traced back decades, "While the US has all but declared its intent to establish global hegemony for decades, it uses the pretext of seeking global peace, security and stability as cover along the way."²⁴ He carries on by stating

¹⁹ *Encyclopedia Britannica*, s.v. "hegemony," accessed April 29, 2017, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/hegemony>.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Richard Haass, *A World in Disarray*, (New York: Penguin Press, 2017): 130-135.

²² *Ibid.*, 276.

²³ John Judis, "America's Failure - and Russia and Iran's Success - in Syria's Cataclysmic Civil War," *TMP*, (Jan, 2017), <http://talkingpointsmemo.com/caf/americas-failure-russia-success-in-syrias-war>.

²⁴ Ulson Gunnar, "US Foreign Policy: Hegemony or Stability, Not Both," *Global Research*, (April, 2017), <http://www.globalresearch.ca/us-foreign-policy-hegemony-or-stability-not-both/5582758>.

the U.S. used its proxy state of Israel to destabilize the Middle Eastern region by inciting wars between them and Arab nations, all with the goal of maintaining its global hegemony.²⁵

Srdja Trifkovic, a Serbian-American international and foreign affairs writer, wrote an article for an online magazine named *Chronicles, a magazine of American culture*. This article refers to President Trump's inaugural address and Trifkovic's comments regarding foreign policy support President Trump's realist views,

“In his inaugural address President Trump made an important statement on foreign affairs which reflects his views on the nature of the international system and America's role in it. His is a realist paradigm, explicitly based on interests rather than “values.” This is at odds with the bipartisan consensus which has guided the U.S. foreign policy for some decades now.”²⁶

Trump himself has said, “...it is the right of all nations to put their own interests first. We do not seek to impose our way of life on anyone but rather to let it shine as an example.”²⁷

President Obama's political adroitness, his motivating speeches and engaging charisma, drew the American people to believe his administration's message regarding the Middle East, be it said, as one of the *police* of the Middle East. Unfortunately, although his intent was in fact to lessen the American footprint in the region, Obama inherited his Presidency mid-fight against radical Islam and ISIS. The Obama Administration, like its predecessors, tried to influence a Middle Eastern region that was both unwilling and not ready to accept such a drastic change as democracy. This in turn led to fractured states where allegiances lied between tribes and ethnicities versus states, ultimately opening the door to powers such as warlords and emirs thus causing much instability and set the conditions for radicalization. This instability meant that the

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Srdja Trifkovic, “Trump's realist vision,” *Chronicles magazine*, (Jan, 2017), <https://www.chroniclesmagazine.org/trumps-realist-vision/>.

²⁷ The White House, “Inaugural Address,” (Jan, 2017), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/inaugural-address>.

U.S. now actually needed to be more involved in the Middle East to avoid the repercussions of leaving power vacuums following conflicts such as in Iraq.

As this paper is being written, the Trump Administration had not yet produced a precise foreign policy concerning the Middle East, with the same granularity seen from past administrations. Based on President Trump's comments regarding foreign policy and about ISIS, his approach to a post-ISIS Middle East seems as one of *laissez-faire*. As long as there is no threat to the U.S., there isn't a need for direct American military involvement, and to knock over governments and to rebuild nations isn't necessary. This is a stark contradiction to his predecessor's foreign policy, which was one of involvement, monitoring and securitization. History has shown that the Middle East region is one with much turmoil, and some of this turmoil has in fact been caused by America's historical foreign policies. Now that the U.S. has a realist President, one who embraces a pragmatic business-like approach to international relations, and who appears to want to change the way the U.S. conducts its foreign business, the door may be open for changing the role the U.S. wants to play globally. We would be foolish to assume that President Trump doesn't want to remain a global power, and his speeches allude to increasing the U.S.'s military capabilities, but perhaps the days of the U.S. projecting their power, democracy and ideology upon others is a thing of the past.

The Iran Nuclear Deal

President Trump has voiced his opinion on the Obama administration's handling of the Iranian nuclear program. He went so far as saying that the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), known as the Iran nuclear deal, was "...the worst I have ever seen. We couldn't have done worse."²⁸ He supports his argument by the fact that through the JCPOA deal, the multilateral economic sanctions that were placed upon Iran were lifted, freeing billions of dollars

²⁸ Donald J. Trump, "Great Again," (New York: Threshold Editions, 2015), 39.

for Iran to use and to possibly fund its terrorist proxies with.²⁹ Richard Haass, comes to the same conclusion about the deal stating that "...the nuclear agreement failed to address most aspects of the challenges posed by Iran, and arguably even exacerbated them by making available resources that had previously been denied."³⁰

While President Trump is no fan of the JCPOA deal, so far there has been no indication that he wants to eliminate the deal altogether. However, the Trump administration did announce new economic sanctions towards Iran in February of this year, targeting persons and organizations who were directly involved with Iran ballistic missile program.³¹

President Trump's transactional leadership style and willingness to reduce U.S. presence in the Middle East, allows us to deduce that he will endeavor to influence Iran to renegotiate the JCPOA. He will do so in part by leveraging his ability to influence Iran's global economic environment, which could be swayed by agreeing to such a renegotiation. Although diplomacy will be his primary tool regarding foreign relations, President Trump has also indicated that if military action is required to reach a goal, he would be willing to commit U.S. forces.

The Trump administration's *America First Foreign policy* states, "Finally, in pursuing a foreign policy based on American interests, we will embrace diplomacy. The world must know that we do not go abroad in search of enemies, that we are always happy when old enemies become friends, and when old friends become allies."³² President Trump's foreign policy regarding the Middle East has stark differences when compared to its predecessor's, nevertheless

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 38-41.

³⁰ Richard Haass, *A World in Disarray*, (New York: Penguin Press, 2017), 275.

³¹ Kailey Love and Dale Sprusansky, "Will the Iran Deal survive the Trump Era?" *The Washington Report on the Middle East Affairs* 36, no. 2 (Mar, 2017): 58-59. <http://search.proquest.com/openview/35051102c732b2a3fdb14ff40f15d381/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=25637> .

³² The White House, "America First Foreign Policy ," <https://www.whitehouse.gov/america-first-foreign-policy>.

there are some similarities that he and Presidents Obama and George W. Bush share; the will to diminish the U.S.'s presence in the Middle-East.³³

Presidential Apprentice

As President Trump begins his mandate with a clear message of not supporting historical U.S. bipartisan guidelines of projecting American pro-democracy ideals internationally, he is faced with a difficult task of dealing with an unstable Middle Eastern region diplomatically. President Trump is displeased with the result of decades of U.S. foreign policy, turning the Middle East into the unstable region that it is today, and would like to bring stability to the region in order to safeguard U.S. interests. Marc Lynch, author and Professor of Political Science and International Affairs at George Washington University, argues that the Bush Administration's invasion of Iraq actually had an effect contrary to what they expected; removing the main regional power allowed Iran and Syria to grow their regional influence.³⁴ In an interesting article on U.S. foreign policies regarding the Middle East, Huffington Post columnist Dennis Santiago explains how in 2003, Donald Trump was ridiculed after having criticized the Bush administration on how it was handling the Middle East.³⁵ He does however point-out the fact that in the end, Trump was right in his assessment and that perhaps we should now pay attention to the way President Trump will handle Middle Eastern interactions.

Although he has a realist approach to diplomacy and many historical successes with a transactional business-style, he verbally mocked several long-time allies while at the same time embracing a rapprochement with Russia's Vladimir Putin. President Trump has insulted some of

³³ Marc Lynch, "Belligerent Minimalism: The Trump Administration and the Middle East," *The Washington Quarterly* vol 39, (Dec, 2016), <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0163660X.2016.1263920>.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Dennis Santiago, "Does America Need a Trump Card in the Middle East?" *The Huffington Post*, updated Jul 13, 2016, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/dennis-santiago/does-america-need-a-trump_b_7789876.html.

his allies, so they may not be willing to lose commercial trade benefits and strategic goals regarding Iran and the Middle East in order to simply please him. China, Russia, Europe, India and South Korea are all major players that trade with Middle Eastern countries including Iran, and thus influence the region. Lacking the support from these states, and others, it will prove difficult for the Trump administration to impose their will in an attempt to stabilize the region.

President Trump's desire to renegotiate the JCPOA will also be affected by his impulsive verbal outbreaks towards his allies, and late-night "foreign policy" tweets. History has shown that strict multilateral sanctions alone are able to affect Iran, and without allied support in increasing sanctions towards Iran, a unilateral U.S. effort to bolster these sanctions will prove to be useless. While a rapprochement with Russia can be seen as positive, Putin's interests regarding the Middle East will dictate his actions. Russia's historical support of Iran should not be forgotten, and their recent actions influencing the Middle Eastern conflicts unnoticed. Not dissimilar to the Trump administration's *America First Foreign Policy*, Putin's statist proclivity means his focal point remains Russian interests.

The cultural understanding of the dynamics at play in the Middle East is the cornerstone to success in handling situations that influence the key players in achieving a desired outcome. As many authors and professionals have alluded to, specifics of President Trump's knowledge of the Middle East are unknown. His unpredictability, including "tweets" affecting foreign relations, can have adverse effects influencing his attempt to bring stability in a region where his predecessors have failed to do so for decades. A poised and patient U.S. President, one who understands the complex cultural workings of a region with historically deep-seeded animosity between states, sectarian mindset and extreme potential for conflict, would be better suited in diplomatically navigating his way through the minefield of decisions which await him. Perhaps,

thought, his dismissal of historical bi-partisan aspirations of imposing democracy within the Middle East will strike a chord with the region's leaders, and they may see it as a welcomed change demonstrating the U.S. now want to be business partners, and not colonists.

Conclusion

President Trump's realist approach to foreign policy, combined with his "Make America Great Again" statist attitude, should equate to less U.S. military involvement in the Middle East. With the exception of the fight against ISIS, President Trump's goal is to use diplomacy first and military action only out of necessity. President Trump desires to restore stability in the Middle East without military engagement, but the void left behind through the dethronement of the regional power Iraq, has opened the door for other regional actors to begin an increase of influential activities in the Middle Eastern region, including the Levant.

Although President Trump lacks his predecessor's suave public demeanor, his foreign policy seems to be a clear departure from the historical American bipartisan hegemonic views. It is unknown how Middle Eastern leaders, both foes and allies, will respond to an American President who attacks problems as if they were business transactions. After decades of conflict and instability in the Middle East, perhaps a new approach towards the region will be the way of allowing a natural rebalancing of powers and stability. How the Trump administration handles peaks and valleys in Middle Eastern volatility, will be a factor influencing its stability.

President Trump has proven that he was right about the Middle East in the past, but only time will tell whether in the high-stakes game of international politics, President Trump had an ace up his sleeve, or a merely a deuce.

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