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From Strategic Patience to Strategic Savvy: The Case of US Foreign Policy

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The coming of the new administration in the US, has perplexed not only the US, the international community but scholars as well. There are many who have tried to break down the policies of the administration, this paper seeks to assign a policy doctrine to the current administration.

Many have called the administration's foreign policy endeavors reckless and directionless. Very often presidents tend to constrict themselves to their foreign policy beliefs and their doctrines, by imperatively stating what they seek to achieve. Thus, failure to achieve more often than not becomes the order of the day.

In light of this, though the Trump administration has not yet released National Security Strategy (NSS) nor its Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) which would give researchers information to form a doctrine. As the doctrine has not been stated clearly, there are some observations from its current policy trajectory that can be made.

Obama and Strategic Patience

In looking back, the Obama doctrine hinged on negotiating with adversaries, reassuring allies as well as a refocus of US forces in more multilateral ways. This meant extending an olive branch to states that were traditional adversaries of the US, this included North Korea, Iran and Russia. The Obama doctrine stressed on the changing role of the US in the international arena, this was especially true in the case of organizations and the decision making process.

The doctrine bore similarities to Kennedy's 1961 inaugural address, "never fear to negotiate but never negotiate out of fear". In dealing with Russia, to varying degrees his strategy was successful. Obama was able to negotiate with Medvedev to reach an agreement on the new START treaty. The two also found common ground to some extent in dealing with Iran and the imposition of sanctions after the discovery of Qom.

However, that was the high point of the US Russian relations during the Obama administration. With the rise of Putin as President, the relations between the two nations hit rock bottom. This was especially true with the Russian annexation of Crimea. In this case, the President's hands were tied, as the Ukraine is not a NATO signatory which meant that article V of the NATO Charter did not apply and interference would lead to a further confrontation with the Russians. In conclusion, the Russians were able to get away with annexing the Ukraine and Crimea with only sanctions from the international community. Therefore, though Obama touted about the Russian exigencies there was not much he could do short of war, which would get the US embroiled in another war, this would also have a ripple effect and further complicated the war in Syria.

Obama was definitely not willing to go to war with Russia pertaining to the crisis in the Ukraine. Thus, the Kremlin had the upper hand. Sanctions, like in the case of North Korea have played miniscule role in deterring countries, in one sense rendering sanctions ineffective.

Obama's strategy was deemed a failure as it did not make headway in the case of Pyongyang. In spite of the sleuth of sanctions imposed on North Korea, they were considered ineffective as they did not alter the Pyongyang's policy. Additionally, the administration failed in its role as global leader to get China to pressurize North Korea to either come to the negotiating table or alter its nuclear policy.

On the other hand, the administration seemed to have cold feet in dealing with its ally South Korea. The administration's stalled in dispatching the THAAD so as to avoid infuriating the unpredictable hermit kingdom, while at the same time curbing an anticipated conflict between the Koreas. In the case of Pyongyang, the policy of strategic patience and strategic engagement was unsuccessful. The reasons for which is not completely the fault of the Obama administration but nonetheless have been attributed to Obama's failure.

In the case of Iran, Obama patience was certainly tested, it took practically the life of the Obama administration to reach a deal with the Iranians. Though it is imperfect, Obama was able to ward off sections within the policy making that called for the use of force. In the final analysis, strategic patience hinged on the 'use of force' as the last resort.

In light of this, where does the Trump doctrine lie?

Trump and Strategic Savvy or Strategic Impatience?

Unofficially, the Trump doctrine hinges on being 'strategically savvy' but it could be considered as strategic impatience (in opposition to

strategic patience). This doctrine signals a proactive foreign policy in comparison to the 'strategic patience' which at times was linked to retrenchment.

The 'proactive policy' of the current administration, is an attempt to limit US forces while simultaneously signaling that there is a 'new sheriff in town'. Trump has displayed a willingness to use force wherever 'he' has deemed necessary, in an attempt to send a strong signal to adversarial states. However, at the same time has shown a willingness to work with these states.

The best way to describe the emerging Trump doctrine is a rebalancing of the alliances. This signals a different way of viewing the system of alliances that was created as a result of the Cold War and the post-Cold War Era. The Trump administration is in the process of attempting to break the proverbial cord between the US and this system. This however does not relate to the US breaking the alliance or sidelining the allies. It refers to the accountability of the allies.

The extension of NATO in the post-cold war era was an attempt to protect the new countries that were born out of the USSR. This was especially true of the Baltic States. Therefore, NATO's reliance on the US increased. Since its inception whether it readily admits it or not, NATO looks to US leadership for its sustainability. The so called 'shake up' promulgated by Trump seems to have sent a strong message to the NATO allies; that reliance on US power under the administration will be solely dependent on the US's choice to use it rather than the US forced to use it. On paper this benefits both parties, in the sense it prevents the US overextension on both sides. This could translate into making both sides reliable, realistic of their limitations, reducing dependency and increasing accountability. The drawbacks for such a policy are more psychological than physical; it degrades the strength of NATO as an international alliance. It weakens NATO alongside Russia. This was made clear after Angela Merkel's comments at the NATO Summit, "we cannot rely on the US". At the same time the question is to what extent will the Trump administration allow a pulling back of US power concerning the allies. Even Obama's strategy called for strategic retrenchment, but he was able to deliver only in certain circumstances for which he was heavily criticized.

Though the Coney hearings and the alleged Russian interference in the US election have dominated the US-Russian relations which could be a good thing, given that administration has no set plan on how to deal with Putin. The allegiance to NATO (which no doubt is a necessity) has been a thorn in US-Russian relations. The recent imposition of additional sanctions has only worsened the relations. However the Trump administration has not supported these sanctions in fact they attempted to reach a deal with congress concerning the sanctions. The sanctions in part could calm domestic fears over Russia on the other hand it could rattle Russia, another tightrope for Trump.

But is this a bad thing? Practically speaking, this policy is a good idea as it focuses less on the projection of US power militarily. Though it has put the alliance under a strain, US cannot afford to walk away from the alliances, the alliance for its part will not turn its back on the US, despite what is being said.

Trump seems to attempting to try and make the allies more accountable. This is especially with respect to the Baltic allies, who have been

critical of Trump while at the same time causing a problematic situation for America vis-a-vis Russia.

On the other hand, the Middle East, the Trump administration will find it difficult to bring the Saudis to task in dealing with terrorism. The bigger problem for Trump is repairing the 'damage' done to the relationship during the Obama administration. The banishment of Qatar by the GCC seems to have been orchestrated by Trump.

Israel however, is where the doctrine has and will turn a blind eye. A reason for this is the domestic ramifications on pulling up Israel could have serious drawbacks for his electoral gains for the upcoming midterm elections as well as 2020.

His strategy towards East Asian countries during the campaign hedged on South Korea and Japan playing a bigger role in their defense against North Korea. However with the firing of the ballistic missiles, the US responded by sending THAAD, as well as upping the ante of the US naval presence in the region.

On the other hand North Korea is a slippery slope. The Trump administration has tried to up the ante in pressurizing China to cut off ties or at least put pressure on North Korea. However with the recent developments in the Korean Peninsula, Pyongyang threatening nuclear war, on the surface it seems as though China's tone towards NK has changed, a reason for this is threefold; china's need to play a greater role in the region as a 'responsible power', the NK behavior which is becoming more unpredictable and uncontrollable (by Beijing), and three a change in the US administration, which seems more hard-line than the previous one.

At least to a certain extent after the recent firing of the ballistic missile, Trump's attempts to pressurize Beijing into a playing a more effective seems to be working. However to what extent China and the US are willing to go t is questionable.

As part of his strategic savvy doctrine, the administration seems to have on the one hand tightened the screws on North Korea however at the same time it seems that it has not limited its activities aimed at US allies as well as US citizens. Thus outweighing the pros and cons is necessary.

This waters down to, the attempt made by the administration to avoid overstretching itself in terms of the countries and regions it is dealing with. However, this idealist notion is shortsighted as the international system is ever changing and gauging from Trump's first international visit being the Middle East it seems to be a priority for the administration. The NATO and Russian conundrum will be secondary, especially given the fact that the US and Russia are collaborating in some way in Syria. Therefore, the Trump administration has to walk a tightrope in the case of Russia especially given the domestic conundrum at this point.

In the Final Analysis

The Trump doctrine, could be a mixture of both 'savvy' and impatience. sounds practical and pragmatic on paper and if the US were 'willing

to ignore its so called global responsibility'. However in reality, it has upset the US allies around the world, who continue to question US commitment. In fact a closer look, it is only the rhetoric that has made it inflammatory.

The Trump administration to a great extent has been savvy in dealing with allies, though they question US commitment they will not be able to leave the US out of any negotiations and the US will to at least some extent involve international allies in the decision making process, to what extent is another question altogether. However, in the long run its aim is for countries to not take US support for granted.

It indeed has its advantages; perception-wise, it is a display of leading from the front rather than behind, signaling an end as well as beginning. It also entails working with adversarial nations through deception. Meaning, conning adversaries into thinking that the US seems to have abandoned its allies. This seems to be a strategy employed by the Trump administration when it comes to Russia. It also entails a drawing of a line for the allies, but knowing well there are exceptions to this rule.

The Trump doctrine is still evolving and it is difficult to state where it is heading given the changes in the international as well as domestic environments tend to influence the making of foreign policy.

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