



Interdisciplinary Political Studies

<http://siba-ese.unisalento.it/index.php/idps>

ISSN: 2039-8573 (electronic version)

IdPS, Issue 4(1) 2018: 7-16

DOI: 10.1285/i20398573v4n1p7

Published on July 15, 2018

EDITORIAL

Between a rock and a hard place: Trump's half-realist, half-mercantilist foreign policy in the Middle East

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KEYWORDS: Trump; Middle East; realism.

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President Trump has succinctly described the Middle East as a ‘troubled place’, a region ‘whose fate lies in the hands of its own people’, and where American vital interests are narrowly defined (Indyk 2018). US vital interests there, namely, fail to comprise the overthrow of dictators, be they Assad or Sisi, or stability through peace by bringing about an end to bloody civil and proxy wars as in Syria and Yemen. They mostly seem to revolve around US-defined key security threats: terrorism and the proliferation of WMD. The attitude by Trump has been described as the vindication of former President Obama ‘leading from behind’ approach that aroused so much criticism at the time of the intervention in Libya in 2011, *in primis* by Trump (Indyk 2018).

American foreign policy under President Trump in the Middle East and North Africa has been a policy rollercoaster, sometimes in line of continuity with policies adopted by the previous administration, sometimes with violent breaks from the past, sometimes apparently brought about by material interest calculations, other times supposedly driven by personal politics and symbolic gestures. All this has happened without a clearcut grand strategy, but rather through *ad hoc* decisions and policy U-turns, and, in bureaucratic politics’ terms, with different parts of the administration contradicting one another, notably State Department and the White House.

In May 2017, despite Trump’s declaratory policy on the US disengagement from the region, the President’s first destination as a foreign trip was Saudi Arabia. The media coverage initially insisted on the extremely good chemistry between Crown Prince Bin Salman and President Trump, later delving into the narrative by both sides of an extremely fruitful meeting, which reinforced the US-Saudi alliance for Riyadh on the international stage and which was held by Trump as an economic success in terms of new trade deals signed. The visibility, enhanced status and prestige enjoyed by the Saudi monarchy, also thanks to the shared vision of the region, emboldened the Saudi and Emirati leadership who declared a blockade against Qatar. While President Trump seemed reluctant to condemn the unilateral move by the two Gulf countries against another Sunni Gulf country, fellow member of the

Gulf Cooperation Council, under the insistence of then Secretary of state Tillerson, the US timidly tried to push the two sides to negotiate, without any success (Wintour 2017).

The biggest reversal of previous policies has notoriously been on Iran, where the July 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), signed by Iran and the P5+1 (the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council plus Germany) has been unilaterally decertified by Washington in October 2017.

On the now defunct Middle East Peace Process (MEPP), President Trump has discursively stood by a two-state solution and the importance of a diplomatic way out, but on the ground the US Embassy has been moved from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem in May 2018, in a unilateral move which was decided despite the lack of negotiations or any promise by Israel of restarting them. After increasingly strained relations between the Obama administration and the Netanyahu government, at least since 2012, Trump has emboldened the Israeli government and has legitimized more belligerent stances vis-à-vis the Palestinians (Entous 2018).

On Syria, after the fall of Raqqa and the weakening of the Islamic State, as a consequence of years of military engagement by an international coalition created by former President Barak Obama, Trump has taken the merit for this and has focused attention on the country's stabilization in the medium term, *de facto* accepting the physical and political survival of President Assad and the continuing role of Russia, acknowledged as kingmaker of the country's future.

In North Africa, US diplomacy has rewarded a military dictatorship and its authoritarian leader, bestowing upon President Sisi the aura of a grand leader, while funds for democracy assistance earmarked for Tunisia have been diminished (Miller & Ruffner 2018). In Libya, the Trump administration has not steered away from the Obama 'leading from behind' approach and has limited itself to targeted airstrikes against ISIS, refraining from playing any role in favoring an agreement between the Government of National Accord (GNA) in the west and the House of Representatives (HOR) based in Tobruk and its ally General Khalifa Haftar in the east (Mezran 2017).

Given the seemingly chaotic, *ad hoc*, arbitrary individual decisions taken by the White House on Middle Eastern affairs, expectations that the new US National Security Strategy (NSS) would have shed light on the future approach and would have spelled out a definition of threats, interests and ensuing US policies, were misplaced. In December 2017, a new US NSS was adopted, which contained many references to the MENA region and how the US should best deal with that ‘troubled place’. The 2017 NSS has coined ‘principled realism’ as framework of reference for US foreign policy, emphasizing the coherence between Trump’s catch all slogan, Make America Great Again, and ‘America First’, a zero-sum foreign policy, impinging on multilateral cooperation. Despite sounding a realist recipe enhancing disengagement and the reduction of costs and risks, it falls short of calling for a full-fledged realist offshore balancing option. This would represent today the most coherent realist approach for US foreign policy. In order for the US to remain the only great power in the Western hemisphere, Washington would get involved only in three areas, Europe, East Asia and the Persian Gulf, three regions of key importance in the global balance of power. In each of these regions it would try to avoid the emergence of a regional hegemon or of another great power dominating regional politics (Walt 2018). In the Middle East, offshore balancing would mean burden-sharing among regional players in terms of providing for security, avoid getting bogged down in regional conflicts, rivalries and in sectarian dynamics. The rationale for foreign policy behavior would be balance of power, rather than ideology, mercantilism, promotion of values, arbitrary intervention aimed at regime change.

Differently from that, in the 2017 NSS formulation, ‘principled realism’ foresees various forms and shapes of ‘competitive engagement’, in those circumstances where the US primacy needs allies to maintain or promote its interests. The NSS is articulated around four pillars: protect America homeland, citizens and way of life; promote American prosperity; preserve peace through strength; and advance US influence worldwide. The transactional approach, whereby the US must be compensated for what it has contributed to the international system or to its allies, is easily identifiable, but it resonates more with a revanchist attitude rather than with

mercantilism. Namely, mercantilism, in its basic formulation, states the subservience of the economy to the state and its interests. As such, it is never indicated as policy compass for the administration's global role. In the strategy, despite the call for a 'principled realism', there is little reference to values or norms. The defence and the promotion of US interests are equaled to commercial interests, on whose altar previous policies, alliances, historical record, can be easily reversed and overturned.

Since his election to the Presidency, Trump has strengthened ties with Israel, even at the expense of upending the Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations, has stepped up cooperation with Russia to de-escalate the war in Syria, and has reinforced the alliance of the US with Sunni Gulf states against Iran. By doing so, as briefly noted, President Trump has strongly endorsed the Saudi-Emirati gambit to isolate Qatar, thereby contributing to a rapprochement between Qatar and non-Arab regional players, first and foremost Turkey and Iran, who have supported Qatar economically and have pledged to step up their military and defense cooperation, should the need arise. Even most importantly, Trump has decertified the Iranian nuclear deal, a deal whose making had taken over a decade of international negotiation and whose implementation was being assured by the International Atomic Energy Agency. Although the decision to reverse the deal unilaterally did not cause its final demise (ICG 2017), it has triggered a chain reaction of negative consequences. It has strengthened hardliners in Tehran, worsened the economic prospects of the country and of the population that was eagerly awaiting for the lift of economic sanctions, diminished the credibility of the US commitment to international agreements, and incentivized Iranian attempts to capitalize on its current influence in Syria, Lebanon, Yemen. It has also legitimized the Saudi stance in the changing regional balance of power vis-à-vis the Iranian one, taking an explicit stand in a regional highly polarized rivalry, something which is not consistent with a purely realist understanding of US foreign policy in the region. In part, the reversal of the JCPOA was ideologically linked to undo Obama's legacy in international diplomacy (Ahmadian 2018). Beyond reversing the greatest foreign policy achievement of the Obama administration, Trump's policy has been driven by three goals.

First, Trump has been intent on countering or pushing back Iran's regional presence, through isolation and containment (Geranmayeh 2018).

Second, it has tried to limit or halt the gains for Iran derived from the JCPOA, adding as reasons beyond 'the flawed' nature of the deal -never explored- the regional role of Iran as a destabilizing force. The Saudi narrative, depicting the Islamic Republic of Iran as exporting terrorism and instability throughout the region, unequivocally shifting the blame on Tehran and inflating the perceived threat has become the US line. To its regional role, Tehran has been accused of aggressive intentions linked to the development of its ballistic missile program. Both issues (i.e., Tehran's regional role and the missile program) had been kept separate from the nuclear negotiations by the Obama administration and the international community, pertaining to different dossiers and blocking diplomatic negotiations on the nuclear program (Ahmadian 2018).

Third, Trump has reinvigorated traditional alliances (Saudi Arabia and the UAE, but also Sisi's Egypt), against Obama's attempt at rebalancing, away from automatic alignment with Saudi Arabia and acting more as an interlocutor rather than its defender.

This rapid overview of Trump's foreign policy in the Middle East seems to suggest, as a preliminary assessment, that neither offshore balancing nor the so-called 'principled realism' can encapsulate the range of erratic policy choices adopted by the US administration in the region. The two approaches -mercantilism and realism- emphasize the importance of the autonomy of the state, and argue against capture by lobbies or particularistic interests. On the one hand, offshore balancing is premised on the preservation of balance of power, the avoidance of the emergence of new regional hegemony or the escalation of intra-regional tensions in key geopolitical areas. Both share a *Realpolitik* reasoning but do not completely overlap. On the other hand, mercantilism has greatly evolved over the last three centuries. From the 18th and 19th century, it focused on wealth as a means to power, on relative gains, on the importance of the trade balance, incentivizing the rise of exports vis-à-vis imports and of exports of manufactured goods (and imports of commodi-

ties) (Drezner 2010). In the 20th century, nationalist economic policies traditionally advocated for by mercantilists, especially in times of crisis, either by emergent economies or by great powers in decline, came under the spotlight with the rise of a globalized economy, leading to a de facto analytical rejection by realist thinkers of mercantilist prescriptions (*Ibid*). In other words, the combination of two paradigms, realism and mercantilism, does not fit hand in glove. Over time, realists have by and large advocated liberal economic policies rather than nationalist and protectionist ones.

Examples of such incoherence from a realist perspective include the intensification of regional tensions and conflicts as a consequence of specific US stances. This occurred when Trump sided with the Saudi-Emirati axis against Qatar in May 2017, leading not only to realignment between Turkey and Qatar, but to a split in the GCC and its potential break-up, with smaller GCC members as Kuwait and Oman trying to mediate the dispute. None of these policy turns were forecast by the US administration or sought after and their consequences, a deteriorating intra-GCC stalemate and reinforcement of non-Arab regional powers in the Gulf, mostly Iran, could undermine US long-term regional stability priorities. Similarly, from the vantage point of ensuring regional stability as an offshore balancer, the unilateral withdrawal from the nuclear agreement with Iran did not serve US purposes. Moreover, the overthrow of the JCPOA was premised on Iran's behavior in issues non-related to the nuclear program. These were used to justify a highly coercive attitude by the US intended at stirring domestic unrest and eventually leading to regime change, i.e., a revisionist approach and an anti-status quo goal. And yet, realism does capture some of the Trump policies in the region, if intended in broad terms, as inspired by laying emphasis on material power and national interests, as far away as possible from idealist conceptions of foreign policy or of inter-state relations. Some of its decisions seem however to have been inspired or motivated by mere economic and commercial interests, as Trump's declaration at the Riyadh summit indicated, by referring to over 110 billion dollars' worth of contracts with Saudi Arabia for arms' imports.

Despite the inaccuracy of Trump's claim - there was actually no deal, no contracts signed, but letters of interest by potential Saudi buyers, which, moreover, dated back from the Obama administration (Riedel 2017)-, linking his support of Saudi foreign policy to supposed commercial gains for the US military industry could be read as a mercantilist foreign policy, where however diplomacy and foreign policy are subjugated to commercial gains not for the state as a whole but for key lobbies, such as the industrial-military complex.

Interestingly, the political capital acquired by Trump with Saudi Arabia or Israel after the move of the US Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, a highly symbolic gesture which has led to Palestinian protests, the deterioration of relations between Palestinian and Israeli leaders, failed to show an immediate advantage for the US. But subsequent events, such as the recent request to Saudi Arabia to increase oil production in the wake of sanctions against Iran and Venezuela (Al Monitor 2018), or the change in the composition of military aid to Israel, where for the first time the Israeli army has been asked to buy more from US military industries rather than from domestic ones, thereby significantly increasing the cost of procurement (Even & Hadad 2018), might signal the desire to accumulate political capital with traditional allies, exerting leverage at other points in time when the need arises.

Trump's foreign policy in the Middle East represents a unique combination of mercantilism, realism, personalized politics that, most remarkably, is likely to be shaped by structural and contingent factors more than strategic and political intentions. In other words, the combination between mercantilism, unprincipled realism, personal politics is likely to further generate chaos as it follows no coherent set of guidelines or strategy. If disengagement from the MENA region had been on the radar for quite some time and had formulated as a goal at least already under the Obama presidency, the personalized realist mercantilism by Trump risks empowering belligerent leaders in the region, from Saudi Arabia through Israel to Egypt, waging wars or intensifying repression of domestic dissent, while providing only sectoral benefits to selected US economic or industrial sectors, especially the industrial-military one, devoid of any national strategic orientation.

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