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How Iran hawks are already scuttling the realism of the Trump administration

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So much for retrenchment. If you let yourself be convinced that the United States would pursue a less activist foreign policy under President Trump, you should start worrying.

Maybe it's news to you that some were hoping for a more peaceful foreign policy from Trump. When he campaigned for president, Donald Trump put out two contradictory messages. At times he positioned himself as the peace candidate, proclaiming his devotion to "America First" principles, and running against the Washington establishment and their dumb, expensive wars. Sometimes, in the very next breath, he would convey that he was tougher and more bloody-minded than that same establishment. He would bring back things worse than waterboarding, he would take the oil, and he would rescind the Obama administration's nuclear deal with Iran.

And now it seems that the problem is already at hand. He seems to be pursuing all the elements of his contradictory foreign policy views at the same time. He is a president without a grand strategy. And if these contradictions remain unresolved, they will generate more confusion among allies and our enemies, along with increasing hostility to U.S. interests around the world.

Trump has already hinted that he intends to pursue detente with Russia. That's not unusual. His two predecessors also tried the same strategy at the beginning of their administrations. To that end Trump has already broached the subject of easing sanctions on Russia, though he reportedly wanted to extract a nuclear arms reduction treaty out of it. Russia seems uninterested. His U.N. ambassador, Nikki Haley, may be playing the bad cop, telling the world that Crimea still belongs to Ukraine.

At the same time, Trump continues the fruitless war in Yemen that he inherited from Obama, apparently hoping it will continue to yield intelligence gains and cement goodwill with America's major regional ally, Saudi Arabia. But that also meant continuing the plan for a risky raid that the Obama administration passed on over a month ago.

Trump is allowing the advisers who are hawkish on Iran and China to influence his decisions, or even pollute the information environment.

Last week, Trump announced his plan for increased sanctions on Iran. National Security Adviser Michael Flynn, whose hostility to Iran verges on the fanatical, falsely attributed to Iran an attack on a Saudi vessel that was launched by the Yemeni Houthis who are in a pitched battle with Saudi Arabia. Flynn's statements on the conflict ignore the agency of Yemeni forces on the ground, simply attributing Houthi actions to Iran. There is something oddly familiar about advisers to a Republican president going on the lookout for any pretext to attack a nation they've long had in their sights.

And, of course, hawkishness with Iran works against detente with Russia. The Russian government does a fair amount of business with Iran, and the two nations have worked together to shore up Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's government. A foreign policy that was able to detach these two nations from each other would represent a genuine strategic advancement for the United States. But so far it is an open question whether Trump and his advisers even understand this. Flynn's own writing seems to suggest he sees Russia as a partner, helping defend the Western world order from Islam at the Gates of Vienna. But the truth is that Russia, just like the United States, has its affinities and interests in the Middle East that can't be simply wished away.

All in all it's a very poor start for anyone hoping for a realist's course correction to U.S. foreign policy. Trump's sloppiness with the refugee executive order, his belligerence with allies, and his incoherent strategy are leading America to more conflict, not less.