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On Trump's Syrian Pullout

Daniel Falcone: As an [expert on American foreign policy](#) what is the true meaning and significance of Trump pulling ground troops out of Syria? Is it this simple and straightforward? What are the implications of [Mattis stepping down](#) in your view?

Richard Falk: Of course, with Trump we never know either the real motivation for an abrupt decision of this sort or whether in the next day or so it might be reversed in an equally abrupt manner. It all depends on how the winds of his imperial ego are blowing. And this is not a reassuring awareness in the [nuclear age](#).

We do know that such an inflammatory decision shifts attention away, at least briefly, from the Mueller developments that seem more threatening to Trump's comfort zone day by day. Beyond these explanations, Trump can accurately claim that he is fulfilling one of his most emphatic pledges of his 2016 presidential campaign, namely, offering scathing criticism of costly interventions in the Middle East as the basis for his commitment to bring American troops home very soon. Such a pledge made a great deal of sense as the American experience with military interventions was a record of unacknowledged failure with a learning curve that hovered around [zero](#).

The unprovoked attack on Iraq in 2003 followed by a prolonged occupation was a flagrant violation of the prohibition on aggressive war, the core principle of the [UN Charter](#) and modern international law. It was also the cause of massive suffering and devastation, resulting in internal strife and constant chaos. The mindless occupation policy imposed by the United States deliberately inflamed sectarian tensions in Iraq, which in turn spread [Sunni/Shi'ia turmoil](#) throughout the region.

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Geopolitically, as well, the Iraq War illustrated the dysfunctional nature of such uses of international force even when the superior military capabilities of the United States are brought to bear. A central strategic goal of the intervention was to weaken the regional footprint of Iran by placing a Western-oriented government on the Iranian border of a country ready and willing to have American military bases on its territory. The main effect of the American intervention and extended presence was the reverse of what was intended. Iranian regional influence in part because the American occupation approach sought to disempower the Sunni dominance that had been associated with Saddam Hussein's regime and put in its place an Iran-oriented Shi'ite leadership.

A further result of the purge of Sunni elements in the upper echelons of the Iraqi armed forces was the formation of ISIS as a terrorist organization committed to the expulsion of the occupying forces from the Middle East and spreading governance under the auspices of radical Islamic leadership. In retrospect the real irony is that Saddam Hussein's regime, although repressive and repulsive, was far preferable for the Iraqi people and even for American strategic goals in the Middle East than was the unlawful intervention and bungled occupation. Our war planners never were willing to come to terms with this systemic series of miscalculations, and more or less arrayed themselves beneath the notorious banner, 'mission accomplished' unfurled to honor the presence of George W. Bush on an American aircraft carrier.

Trump claims that his policies for the past two years have defeated ISIS, making prudent and appropriate from a national security perspective to withdraw American ground forces at this time. The claim as to ISIS is disputed by the entire defense establishment in the U.S., and seems to have contributed to the Secretary of Defense, General James Mattis, decision to submit a thinly veiled criticism of Trump's withdrawal approach on strategic grounds, stressing especially the importance of acting in concert with allies. The decision has also been criticized as abandoning Syrian Kurds to the tender mercies of Assad's regime and Erdogan's Turkey. For the governments in Damascus and Ankara, the Kurds, while allied with the U.S. in its anti-ISIS campaign, pose threats to the territorial integrity and political stability of both Syria and Turkey.

Daniel Falcone: How do you assess the mainstream agenda setting media's response to Trump's latest foreign policy decision regarding Syria? They look pro-intervention and occupation on this matter? For example, I haven't heard much genuine concern for the Kurds or any other altruistic reasons for staying on their part in the interests of the Syrian people.

Richard Falk: My impression is that the media response has so far been dominated by the sort of bipartisan approach that earlier underpinned American foreign policy during the Cold War and produced the 'Washington Consensus' that provided ideological coherence for the neoliberal version of economic globalization. During the Cold War this militarization of foreign policy led to a series of interventions on the geopolitical periphery, culminating in the Vietnam War. With respect to the world economy, a capital-driven approach to economic policy that was largely indifferent to the human consequences of market forces resulted in gross inequities with respect to the distribution of the benefits of economic growth.

The experience of widening disparities of wealth and income became a structural feature of the world economy, and seems closely connected to the rage expressed by those multitudes who quite reasonably feel victimized by the policies accepted by the entire policy establishment, whether they identify as Democrats or Republicans. This rage has been translated into various forms of political frustration, including giving rise to an electoral tidal wave in the leading constitutional democracies around the entire world that brought to power demagogic figures whose defining message was to pose as enemies of the established order. In Trump's case, he sloganized this hostility by a campaign promise 'to drain the swamp.' This political spectacle is enacted in various ways reflecting the distinctiveness of the autocrat and the particularities of each set of national circumstances. The Syrian withdrawal decision is perceived as one more unacceptable consensus-disruptive move by Trump that includes a repudiation of one the pillars of the Cold War Era, namely, tight alliances epitomized by NATO. Such a unilateral move by Trump without any reliance on prior consultations with leading allies is seen as a further blow to American leadership of the Western democracies. The fact that the Trump decision was endorsed by Putin at a time when Western elites are urging a more confrontational approach to Russia is taken by the media a further sign that the U.S. is in a go it alone foreign policy.

The Mattis resignation letter very effectively encourages the media to react in this manner. It challenges Trump in all but name, complaining both about alliance disruption and the failure to heed the views of those who opposed the Syrian pullout. He is obviously upset that the advice of those (including his own) was ignored. He reminds readers of his extensive professional experience and knowledge that is relevant to understanding both the Syrian reality and the implausibility of claiming that ISIS is defeated. In essence, he deplores the military withdrawal from Syria, insisting that it will be of help to America's

principal rivals in the world, Russia and China, “whose strategic interests are increasingly in tension with ours.” The following sentence in the Mattis letter could have been written in the midst of the Cold War: “It is clear that China and Russia....want to shape a world consistent with their authoritarian model—gaining veto authority over other nations’ economic, diplomatic, and security decisions—to promote their own interests at the expense of their neighbors, America and our allies.”

It is not only that most influential media outlets side with the critics of this Trump initiative, but their failure to convey the rationale justifying his decision beyond saying that he is fulfilling a campaign pledge or shifting the national conversation away from the Special Counsel. If Trump follows up the withdrawal with a termination of air strikes in Syria, and makes a significant use of the funds saved by foregoing military operations to hasten a Syrian recovery from seven years of devastation, massive human displacement, and incredible civilian suffering, the policy should then receive some applause as constructive steps in a demilitarizing direction.

I would predict that the national security establishment will condemn even this evidence of a serious shift toward disengagement from Middle East turmoil as an unwelcome retreat from American leadership, and a form of encouragement to its adversaries and rivals to take more risks to expand their zones of influence. If this is so, the mainstream media is sure to follow along, nightly parading a series of retired generals who bemoaning this renunciation of the U.S. global security role of the past half century of ‘forever war.’

It is common for media pundits to question policy choices so long as they do not touch the fundamental guidelines of structure and geopolitical priorities that have shaped the American global role ever since 1945. These fundamentals include the Atlantic Alliance as embodied in NATO, market-oriented constitutionalism as embedded in the neoliberal credo, and the globe-girdling military presence as typified by more than 800 overseas military bases, a sizable naval operation patrolling in every ocean, and a capability to wage hyper war from any point in space. The media will not challenge those that defend this security structure, and even Fox News and the Murdoch media outlets can be expected to be neutral, departing from their habitual acceptance of whatever Trump does.

It is not surprising that CNN news anchors such as Don Lemon or Chris Cuomo almost salivated in response to the Mattis letter, reading it aloud as if it was an instant classic to be compared with the Gettysburg Address.

Their anti-Trump animus was so intense that they did not even express some skepticism about Mattis’ geopolitical hubris that seemed both dated and overly belligerent. His words:

“the US remains the indispensable nation in the free world.” Really. This opinion is not shared by almost all peoples in the world, most of whom worry more about what the United States does than they do about China and Russia.

In my view the anti-Trump media frenzy does reflect well-grounded worries about Trump’s style and substance, yet it is failing to expose the citizenry to pluralist views, especially in foreign policy by shutting down almost completely progressive voices. The media is not guilty of fake news, but it is guilty of partisanship, and unfriendly to critics on the left.

Daniel Falcone: Are there any important implications for the Syrian pull out that coincide with the harsh treatment of Iran? Could this possibly negate any positive steps with Middle East diplomacy? [Is Iran pertinent here?](#)

Richard Falk: At this point it is difficult to tell whether the Syrian withdrawal will intensify Trump’s anti-Iran policy or lead to its weakening, and even abandonment. It seems as though neither Israel nor Saudi Arabia are comfortable with Trump’s latest move, partly because they were evidently not consulted, or even briefed, and partly because it could be interpreted as the beginning of an American disengagement from the Middle East and a phasing out of George W. Bush’s ‘war on terror’ launched after 9/11, continuing year after year without an endgame, although Obama at one point openly regretted this, and promised to devise one, but it never happened.

I am hard put to find any positive initiatives in recent Middle East diplomacy emanating from Washington. Trump/Kushner have carried the partisan pro-Israeli policies of earlier presidencies to absurdly one-sided extremes by way of the embassy move to Jerusalem, silence about the weekly atrocities at the Gaza fence, cruel cuts the UNRWA funding, closing the PLO office in Washington, questioning Palestinian refugee status, and seeming to be comfortable with Israel’s recent moves in its Knesset toward a one-state apartheid solution.

Perhaps, American pressures are moving Saudi Arabia and its allies to end their intervention in Yemen, previously backed by the United States, and pushing the civilian population to the very brink of starvation, and what is already being called the worst famine in the past hundred years. If this desirable result materializes, it can be seen as an unintended consequence of the grotesque Khashoggi murder, creating strong incentives in Washington to rethink its embrace of Mohammed Bin Salmon as ally and partner. Or put more crudely, the arms sales bonanza with Riyadh could be in trouble unless the Yemen War is brought to an end without a humanitarian catastrophe.

Daniel Falcone: Trump's doctrine has been called "Me First." Does this title apply in the case?

Richard Falk: I have no reason to doubt that Trump's actions with regard to Syria are basically reflections of his narcissistic political style as expressed at a particular moment. Yet, as earlier suggested, because Trump did it on the basis of selfish motives, does mean that we should not evaluate the policy on its merits rather than through the eyes of the dominant political class in Washington that has brought grief to tens of millions for decades. (These 'experts' have over time built up an intellectual and career dependence on global militarism and permanent warfare) It means, among other things a stubborn refusal to take note of a string of failures where battlefield dominance has not translated into control of political outcomes, but instead ended in stinging political defeats. At bottom, there persisted a stunning refusal to heed this central lesson of the Vietnam War, a refusal repeated in Afghanistan, Iraq, and with respect to most of the colonial wars. In each instance the side that won on the battlefield lost the war in the end, yet only after inflicting terrible damage and enduring heavy human, economic, and reputational costs. Nothing helpful was learned, and energies were devoted to how to reinvent counterinsurgency and counterterrorist doctrine so as to win such struggles for the political control of distant countries.

If Trump stumbles onto a security path that ends such interventions in the global south we should celebrate the result, even if we withhold praise from Trump himself. Beyond this, we should not be too quick to condemn his openness to a cooperative relationship with Russia if it helps the world avoid a second, more dangerous cold war that it can ill afford at this time of climate change. Trump might not know exactly what he is doing but bypassing Europe for a geopolitical bargain with Moscow might make realist sense under the historical circumstances, and realists themselves need to wake up to this benign possibility.

Of course, my wish for an end to militarism, nuclearism, and foreign interventions may be coloring my views, and is blindfolding me with respect to the dangers and risks that some associate with Trump's march to the apocalypse. I acknowledge this, but I am also convinced that the conventional candidates of either political party would never in a thousand years pull the rug out from under this globalized militarism that could never tolerate a peaceful future for humanity. We are trapped in a cage sometimes called 'the war system,' which has the semblance of a permanent lockup.

Daniel Falcone: Will [liberal hawks](#) react the same way to Syria as they typically do with Russia? This seems to be a failing strategy to reclaim the presidency in 2020. Do you agree?

Richard Falk: I fear that the centrist pragmatism of all liberals, and not only the hawks. They have supported war after war as well as forged a strong new consensus that the time has come to challenge Russia and China once again. If Putin is pleased, then Trump is wrong. Such reasoning seems to be dominant among the policy planners in Washington and the opinion and editorial commentary of CNN and the NY Times. Such issues are not even treated as fit subjects for debate and discussion. Instead, there are two or more guests with military or CIA backgrounds that take turns lambasting Trump's Syria moves, especially as it has been coupled with a White House decision to halve the American troop contingent in [Afghanistan by withdrawing 7,000 soldiers](#), hardly a rash decision considering that the American military presence in Afghanistan is about to enter its 17th year, and stability for the country is further away than it was in 2002 when the occupation began.

As far as the [2020 election](#) is concerned, it will be a great lost opportunity if the Democrats nominate a centrist liberal, who might be far more humane than Trump at home, but would likely recommit to the war of terror and a revival of American readiness to avoid political setbacks in various parts of the world, never having learned this supreme lesson that military intervention does not work in the post-colonial world.

Of course, these days we cannot be sure of anything, including being confident that such a return to the old ways of doing foreign policy by a Democratic candidate would be an electoral disaster. Trump remains unpopular outside his base. This means that if the stock market stays down, [trade wars reduce living standards](#) in the country, the undocumented are cruelly deported or asylum seeking women and children are shot at the border, a smooth talking Democrat with the politically correct national security views would win, maybe even scoring a landslide.

But would this outcome be a victory for the peoples of the world? If Trump were to stay the Syrian withdrawal course, not a likely prospect, it might not be so easy to vote him out of office with a clear conscience. This suggestion is meant as a provocation to liberals and establishmentarians, but it does call attention to the likely frightful foreclosure of peaceful options for [American voters and the likely choices in 2020](#). The liberal line in 2016 was that compared to Sanders, Hillary Clinton was electable and would get things done, and look where that landed us!

