



Donald Trump's first foray into foreign affairs

Dave Stockton Wed, 07/06/2017 - 15:46

Dave Stockton

Donald Trump used his eight-day, five-country visit to the Middle East and Europe to emphasise that his election campaign statements on foreign affairs; Nato is obsolete, Brexit is beautiful, climate change is a hoax, were not just for domestic consumption, to be rapidly dropped for normal diplomacy.

However, his trip did include some ironic twists. Despite his repeated identification of Islam with terrorism and his ongoing attempts to ban Muslim travellers from Iran, Somalia, Sudan, Yemen, Syria and Libya from entering the US, his first port of call was Saudi Arabia, the Wahabi fundamentalist state whose 'values', including sharia law, beheadings, the severe oppression of women and intolerance of Christians, among others, might seem the complete opposite of those proclaimed as America's.

The desert kingdom has sponsored fundamentalist mosques, madrassas and preachers across the Muslim world which have acted as a seed bed for a wide spectrum of jihadist terrorists, not least Osama bin Laden and 15 of the 19 9/11 attackers who were Saudi citizens. However, the corrupt Saudi royal family are now themselves the target of the salafi-jihadists and so qualify as warriors against terrorism.

Indeed, the whole visit was in sharp contrast to Trump's campaigning when he said Saudi Arabia wants 'women as slaves and to kill gays' and suggested on more than one occasion that it was behind the 9/11 attacks. A curious piece of symbolism occurred when Trump, King Salman bin Abdul Aziz al Saud and Egypt's dictator, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, opened Riyadh's Global Center for Combating Extremist Ideology and were photographed placing their hands on an illuminated globe and looking like they were engaged in some sort of satanic ritual, echoing the witches in Macbeth, 'Double, double toil and trouble'!

Scorning the re-election two days before of 'moderate' Iranian President Hassan Ruhani, Trump effectively endorsed the Saudi regime's proxy war with Iran in Yemen, with an arms deal worth \$110bn. Emboldened, the Saudis have gone on to declare a virtual economic siege of Qatar, the only statelet in the region that does not endorse the Kingdom's proxy conflicts with Iran and whose Al Jazeera broadcasts repeatedly embarrass the various despots of the region, including the Egyptian dictator.

Contradicting statements by Tillerson and the Pentagon urging conciliation with Qatar, since his return Trump has praised Saudi Arabia for its attack, even claiming it as a fruit of his visit. The Pentagon's concern is understandable, given Qatar's strategic importance to the US military. More than 11,000 US and coalition forces are deployed there, at the al Udeid Air Base, from which more than 100 aircraft operate in combined operations in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan.

Trump claimed another success in his stopover talks with Benjamin Netanyahu in Jerusalem and with Mahmoud Abbas in Bethlehem. These took place against the background of a Palestinian general strike across the occupied West Bank in solidarity with hunger strikers in Israeli jails. Israeli sources reported that Trump 'yelled' at Abbas during their meeting, claiming, on the basis of 'evidence' shown him by Netanyahu, that the PNA leader had deceived him about discouraging 'terrorist' attacks on Israel. If true, this indicates the contempt with which Trump regards the Palestinians; if false, how slight the Israeli's regard for Trump.

Clearly, the 'great deal' that Trump contemplates could only be a victory for 'Bibi', since the latter has made it clear

that a sovereign Palestinian state, west of the Jordan, is not even on the table. Thus, all that awaits the hapless 'Abu Marzen' is total humiliation. Part of the 'peace' process could be US support for Israeli attacks on Hezbollah and Hamas and even, with Saudi support, on Iran. In other words, Trump is laying the ground for another chaotic war in the region that will make Obama and Hilary Clinton look like peaceniks.

Secretary of State Rex Tillerson helpfully explained the relationship between Trump's moralistic speeches and tweets at home and US foreign policy. There is none, stupid.

'I think it is really important that all of us understand the difference between policy and values. Our values around freedom, human dignity, the way people are treated, those are our values. Those are not our policies.' As a former oil executive, he should be an expert on strategic hypocrisy.

Moving on to the 28th Nato Summit in Brussels on April 24-5, Trump berated his assembled allies for ripping off America's taxpayers and 'owing' billions in defence spending.

'I have been very, very direct with (Nato) Secretary Stoltenberg and members of the alliance in saying Nato members must finally contribute their fair share and meet their financial obligations. But 23 of the 28 member nations are still not paying what they should be paying and what they are supposed to be paying for their defence. This is not fair to the people and taxpayers of the United States and many of these nations owe massive amounts of money from past years, and not paying in those past years.'

In 2011, EU member states spent \$281 billion on defence alone, almost twice the EU's total annual budget. Of course, this was dwarfed by the United States, which spent over \$711 billion on its military. Similarly, European Union states can deploy barely 100,000 soldiers for operations beyond their borders whereas the USA can field 400,000. Its 'strategic assets'; long-range transport planes and ships, air tankers, precision-guided-munitions also far outnumber those of the Europeans.

The reason for this imbalance is, of course, obvious: the US is the self-appointed world policeman, intervening regularly all around the globe, determined to maintain strategic superiority over its nearest superpower rivals who, in any case, presently have only a regional outreach. In the century of Britain's world dominance it, too, maintained the same sort of superiority, then measured in terms of naval strength. For all Trump's bluster about the Europeans 'owing' the US taxpayer, this is not a sign of the Americans' strength but of their fear of decline.

Nevertheless, the European heads of state acknowledged their sins and reaffirmed their previous pledges to spend two per cent of GDP on defence: their average spending is presently about 1.4 per cent.

When it comes to foreign affairs and, in particular, to wars, when the US says 'Jump!' Britain asks 'How high?' Whilst running down its National Health Service, Britain already spends over the target 2 per cent on "defence" and May and the Tories promise to spend even more. Germany, however, is on Trump's naughty stool as far as arms spending is concerned. For Germany to reach the 2 percent target would mean an increase from €37 bn to €69 bn. For Europe's Nato members, taken as a whole, it would mean an increase of €200bn up to more than €300 bn.

For a continent where many countries are still implementing austerity and where leading EU states like France and Germany spend twice as much as the USA on welfare as a percentage of GDP, persuading their electorates to endorse a huge rearmament programme will be no easy matter.

Without Britain to fight his corner, Trump may find it difficult to gain German and French support for any Middle East adventures against Iran that he is planning with the Saudis and the Israelis; only days after Trump's departure, the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, made what is being seen as a veritable declaration of independence in a speech to the Christian Social Union, her own party's Bavarian sister-party:

'The times when we could completely count on others, they are over to a certain extent. I've experienced this in the last few days. And that is why I can only say that we Europeans must really take our fate into our own hands, of course in

friendship with the US, in friendship with Great Britain.?

Indeed, at their Bratislava summit last September, the first from which Britain was excluded, EU leaders had already discussed plans for the foundation of a European military force with 'strategic autonomy' and a new 'EU Global Strategy'. This project, long favoured by Germany and France, and supported by Italy and Poland, the other countries on the mainland with sizeable armies, had been repeatedly vetoed by Britain.

The response of the UK Defence Secretary, Michael Fallon, that 'this will not happen' shows that he is living in the past. Britain will not be consulted. Indeed, after the German elections in the autumn, when Brexit negotiations really get going, it will soon find itself in the painful posture of a supplicant. Britain will no longer be vetoing decisions, let alone dictating terms, for Europe.

Despite diplomatic promises to remain 'Atlanticist', a European Defence Force will ultimately call into question the existence of the whole Nato protection racket, a process Trump himself began when he called Nato 'obsolete'. Whilst the break up of Nato is not an immediate option, if Trump continues with his unilateral actions, neither consulting his allies nor accommodating their own imperialist interests, then the evolution of mainland Europe towards an independent imperialist block is likely to proceed apace. The main beneficiary of these developments is likely to be Vladimir Putin.

As for Britain, being a US poodle will be even more problematic for Theresa May than it was for Tony Blair. If she gets a working majority on June 8 she will find herself forced to go hand in hand with Trump on his various adventures, as well as finding that beggars can't be choosers when it comes to trade 'deals'. In any case, despite Trump's fulsome praise for it, Brexit will inevitably mean that the UK can no longer act as the US Trojan Horse in Europe and this will radically devalue her stock in Washington and on Wall Street.

Trump's hostility to Germany extends beyond the question of arms spending. At the 43rd G7 meeting in Taormina on 26-27 May, he was equally frank about German trade policy, which he characterised as 'bad, very bad'.

'Look at the millions of cars they sell in the US. Terrible. We will stop this', he raged. In January, he had already threatened Germany with a 35 percent import tax on its cars 'If you go down Fifth Avenue everyone has a Mercedes Benz in front of his house', he told Bild newspaper. 'How many Chevrolets do you see in Germany? Not very many, maybe none at all - it's a one-way street.'

'We have a MASSIVE trade deficit with Germany, plus they pay FAR LESS than they should on NATO & military. Very bad for U.S. This will change,' Trump tweeted during the summit.

BMW's Chief Executive, Harald Krueger, struck back, pointing out that the company's biggest plant worldwide is in Spartanburg, South Carolina. In 2016, the company sold a total of 313,174 vehicles in the US. Of that number, 103,943, 32 percent, were built in the US while the remainder of Spartanburg's production, some 70%, were exported to markets around the world. The value of BMW exports from the US that year was more than \$10.5 bn, making it the highest value exporter of vehicles from the US, according to the Commerce Dept.?

Clearly there is more than an element of sheer bluster in Trump's threats of a tariff war. Congress, not to say the WTO, might have something to say about that. His presidency is already under siege at home, and not just from popular resistance to his reactionary policies but from sections of the Republicans as well as the Democrats on Capitol Hill and from within the security services and the battery of semi-official foreign policy institutes in Washington.

If Trump is able to swing the US ruling class and its state behind such a change in strategy, then we have indeed just witnessed an important turning point. It would be comparable to that which occurred between 1946 and 1948, with Merkel's speech to the CSU an equivalent to Winston Churchill's 'Iron Curtain' speech in Fulton, Missouri.

But this is a very big IF.

Trump and his strange team of family and business cronies want the US to break free from multilateral trade deals and commitments and also permanent or unchangeable military alliances. A ferocious battle is going on within the US establishment over whether to maintain America's entire post-1948 strategy of relating to a united European economy, tied to the US by Nato, or to replace this with a global, freebooting US striking advantageous deals with its rivals, or attacking those too weak to resist it.

The former strategy was that of the Clintons and the Bushes and their Neocon and neoliberal advisors. True, they wanted to refresh this perspective with another Cold War for which a newly assertive Russia, under Putin, was proving a suitable adversary. So far, Trump has met a phalanx of opposition to opening talks with Russia, though this was one of his election promises and something for which he could claim a popular mandate if he wished.

Thus, Trump's first foray into global politics has not yet resulted in the exposition of a new US strategic doctrine or a definite alternative to neoliberal globalisation. It has revealed his appetite for breaking with existing economic and military doctrines and multilateral alliances and trade agreements. What is not clear is whether the US ruling class will fall in behind this fundamental change in strategy. However, it does mark an intensification of the conflicts between the major imperialist blocks and a swapping of enemies for allies and vice versa.

What the membership and shape of future alliances might be cannot yet be predicted but that their rivalries, and the breaking up of economic blocks, will lead to wars with highly dangerous consequences, can be. Without excusing or supporting any of the imperialist camps, or their regional proxies, socialists in all countries need to expose their own ruling classes' plans and do all they can to defeat them.

Above all, we need to bear in mind the injunction with which Karl Marx concluded the Inaugural Address of the First International; that the working class, 'has the duty to master themselves the mysteries of international politics; to watch the diplomatic acts of their respective governments; to counteract them, if necessary, by all means in their power'; and that, 'The fight for such a foreign policy forms part of the general struggle for the emancipation of the working classes'.

Today, there is no Socialist or Communist International willing, let alone able, to mobilise the labour movements of the world against the Trumps, the Mays, the Merkels, the Putins or the Xis. Remedying this lack should be a high priority. The demonstrations against the meeting of G20 leaders in Hamburg, on 7/8 July, should be used as a golden opportunity not only to plan further international actions against war, disruption of the global economy and the danger of environmental catastrophe, but also for socialists to commit to working together on an international programme of struggle against capitalism on the basis of which a new, fifth, International can be founded.

Source URL: <https://fifthinternational.org/content/donald-trump%E2%80%99s-first-foray-foreign-affairs>