

From Strategic Patience to Direct Diplomacy: A Tale of Two Ends; An Assessment of Obama and Trump Foreign Policy Center Fuses

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ABSTRACT

When there is a change in regime elsewhere across the world, there are expectations of changes. This is the same for foreign policy of the state and there on new directions are taken. Hence on, the paper sought to show that there have been specific changes in policy regimes of the US, when the Obama regime came to a close and then the rise of the new Trump regime. There seemed to be a two tale end to both Presidencies. This paper has explored these two tales and narrates the extent to which strategic patience of President Obama has given way to the direct diplomacy of President Trump

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INTRODUCTION

After the US election of 2008 which brought the first black president into the oval office, the direction as to which path the failing foreign policy of President Bush was to follow came about with a lot of suspense. The Obama administration was faced with the task of tackling the fore long policy of pre-emptive wars in the Middle East especially. The idea for Obama was to pull out of the meaningless wars going on in the gulf peninsula as well as Afghanistan by a set timeframe. This sudden twist in policy has happened again with the coming into the oval office of President Donald Trump in 2016. The direction of action against North Korea and Iran shows distinct character under the two regimes. So the story goes that President George Bush threatened and took military action against adversary nations (Axis of Evil) such as Afghanistan and Iraq, while his successor President Barack Obama opted for the non- military approach in the face of curtailing what was called human casualties in relation to troops on the ground. This approach by Barack Obama has been termed as strategic patience. This consists an approach towards foreign policy in the realm of careful diplomatic and painful sanction driven action. The new US secretary of state Rex Tillerson mentioned that this approach to adversary nations is over (The Independent: April 2017). Donald trump the latest US president who ran on the republican platform has opted for more of direct diplomatic as well as

military approach instead of strategic patience. It is these changes in policy direction of the Trump regime that this paper seeks to analyze and bring out of its shadow. The paper uses the realist paradigm of analysis.

The Doctrine of 'Strategic Patience'

Strategy refers to the intricate action of a nation or state towards maximizing its power potential or national interests in relation with other states. The aim is to ensure advantage albeit strategically when it comes to policy issues whether domestic or foreign. Patience refers to the ability to be calm in situations that warrant blatant action whether tangible or intangible. Thus, the doctrine of Strategic patience marrying the two refers to the foreign policy that consists in the desisting from direct military action by a state, but then the use of careful diplomatic and strategic sanctions, in an approach to woo an adversary nation from a strategically dangerous or disadvantageous position, to a more safe or advantageous approach to the host nation hoisting the strategic path.

Some refer to the doctrine as an action of 'wait and see' while the adversary nation in question makes its moves expectedly to the host nation's advantageous disposition (ibi.com:2017). In this way the nation 'A' indulging in strategic patience simply sits back and watch as the other nation 'B' in question acts. This is

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expectedly towards the policy direction nation 'A' expects nation 'B' to indulge or implement. It can also be referred to as playing the vulture, while the preying nation waits in an elevated position to see the actions of the adversary nation come to compliance with an expected outcome (policy). Strategic patience requires one state to be on an elevated or stronger position than its host nation. This power dynamic is what makes the doctrine of strategic patience to work. If two states are on parallel threshold, then none of the states can say to be indulging in strategic patience.

The Alternative to 'Strategic Patience'

If strategic patience refers to the reticence from the overt use of force but desisting from military action, then the alternative to this is clearly spelt out. Military action or direct diplomatic sanctions apply, in the hope of furthering strategic gains. This could constitute either the use of threats of military force or perhaps a show of force militarily. This is to compel the other side to a policy direction of which the other state might not have wanted to do. This approach might be undemocratic or democratic. It is democratic when the using state has passed all democratic channels such as parliamentary assent, international body or Bretton woods approval, consensus and dialogue. It becomes undemocratic when the using state without any due consideration attacks the other side militarily and aggressively without due process.

Secondly, an alternative could be the use of both Strategic Patience and the threat of the use of force or on the other hand the use of force. This approach I term here as the 'dual approach'. Others might call this the carrot and stick approach in which the idea is to use both hard and soft diplomacy and on the other hand apply the threat of the use of force or direct force. Either way, the aim is to bring the other side to a predisposed position. The effectiveness of either approach remains debatable. This is because in most instances where the use of overt force has proliferated, ending the carnage is usually hard to come by. In addition, the return to constitutional governance in the victim country is usually at its nadir.

Thus, the debate as to which foreign policy to be taken is usually very unpredictable. Each regime comes with a set agenda and strategy it has programmed itself to follow. Arguably strategic patience has seemed to work under President Obama in the case of Iran and its nuclear program. The end result is the Iranian Nuclear deal of 2015 otherwise known as the JCPOA (Joint comprehensive plan of action). This has seemed to hold as America and her Allies in Europe brokered a deal in which Iran will solely but eventually dismantle its nuclear program in not more than a decade. In other considerations, the events happening in Syria has seemed to show the downside of inaction. In this way, inaction has led to crimes against humanity by the Assad regime against his own people with the use of biological weapons.

The extent to which military force can be claimed to have succeeded also remains problematic, this is simply because of the issue of measurement. In other words it cannot be quantified. But perhaps we can look at instances where war has been waged on supposed "Terror Nations" or "Rogue states". A

good case is Iraq and Afghanistan. In Iraq, even though the American led coalition have been able to oust Saddam Hussein and install a government currently under Fuad Musum, Iraq remains a very unstable country. There is the rise of terror groups such as ISIS and then terror and suicide bombings by different groups in the country. In addition, factions have taken up some states as their own against the Iraqi government. It is not dissimilar to the case in Afghanistan after more than 14 years of US military occupation. There still remains elements of terrorist activities in Afghanistan and the Government elected into office have usually tended to be very weak in the face of different factions and warlords holding different regions of the country as personal fiefdoms. This constitutes a failed foreign policy for the US especially the Bush administration preceding Obama, as there seems to be less of stability in either Iraq or Afghanistan, as terror has only increased even with military occupation.

From Obama to Trump a Tale of Two Ends

President Barack Obama came into the Oval Office in 2008 and inherited a myriad of problems. A failing economy, a suffering middle class, discontent for the previous regime and the War on Terror in the Middle East and other parts of the world such as Africa. Obama faced the challenge of how to face the Muslim world as it was so called and which had a strenuous relationship with the previous regime. His first move was to make peace with the Muslim world and create a clear cut difference between supposed terrorists and Islam as a whole religion. This won him over a lot of support in the Middle East, North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa as a whole in view of this new relationship with other nations supposedly referred to as the Axis of Evil (by the Bush regime preceding Obama). The aim and agenda was to engage into a world already reeling from two devastating wars led by the US, albeit this time in a solemn, cautious and less costly manner (efficient). Next was to rally allies behind America in a new world outlook. The aim is to pull out militarily from the Middle East in the hopes of pushing a new policy of military reticence and Vis a Vis the strategy of more allied involvement in the theater of conflict. This constituted Obamas strategy which went a long way in helping America curtail the costs already incurred in the costly wars it already engaged in and thus on the road to a strong economic recovery.

In Obamas words the action that was to be taken included to responsibly end the war in Iraq, finish the battle with AL Qaeda and the Taliban, to stop nuclear weapons from getting into the wrong hands in rogue states and terrorists, to make secure Americas energy supplies and rebuild Americas strained alliances (telegraph.co.uk:2018). The next notable positive engagement in foreign policy involved Cuba, a country that had been on loggerheads with the US since the 1960s and had not had diplomatic engagements with each other since then. Obama reached out to the Cuban government in an effort to normalize relations and open up the arena of trade and commerce, side by side political, and social relations. This marked another unprecedented move since Obamas predecessors.

In the Middle East, Iran since its revolution in 1970 had made significant forward moves in its development as an elite country.

Coming into the 21st century, Iran has gone on to make moves into developing nuclear capabilities which will confirm its elitist status in the world.

And then there is North Korea, another rogue state of Asian descent. North Korea had been a rogue state since its founding after the Korean War. It had branded the US its number one enemy and had aligned with Russia formerly USSR and China on the communist threshold. It is at this point I bring in the new regime, this time under President Donald Trump. There seems to be a change of policy from the days of Barack Obama.

Trump has seemed to look to engage directly with adversary nations such as North Korea and Russia. The most significant attribution being the Singapore summit between Trump and Kim Jong Un. Where the two leaders met to talk about denuclearization amongst other things. No matter how little that had been gotten from the summit, it remains a significant step forward for American as well as world peace.

Figure 1: Kim Jong Un and Donald Trump at Singapore summit.



This has been followed up by another summit in Vietnam where the talks might move beyond the North Korea's Nuclear program to other deals that could include the dismantling of sanctions that has crippled North Korea's economy amongst others. This is even though the US still views the North Koreans as a threat of sorts (The Straits Times: 2018). Among the agreements due for the Singaporean summit was that the US would provide security guarantees to Korea and while on the other hand Korea will look to denuclearize in the near future (Jennifer Williams: 2018). The following statement accrues to the agreement above that;

The United States and the Democratic People's republic of Korea commit to establish new U.S- DPRK relations in accordance with the desires of the peoples of the two countries for peace and prosperity. The United States and DPRK will join their efforts to build a lasting and stable peace regime on the Korean Peninsula.

Reaffirming the April 27, 2018 Panmunjom declaration, the DPRK commits to work towards complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. The United States and the DPRK commit to recovering POWs/MIA remains including the immediate repatriation of those already identified.

These bold declarations although vague marked a milestone in the direct diplomatic means of the Trump administration. Before this there was the meeting with Vladimir Putin in Helsinki. The fact that Trump had taken this approach to engaging with North Korea has shown a sudden shift to direct diplomacy from the strategic patience of Barack Obama.

In Iran, the case has been different. First Trump disagreed with the trademark deal from strategic patience of Obama with the Iranians, where there was a nuclear deal in place to check the excesses of the Iranians. Trump repealed the deal struck in 2015 and slapped direct sanctions against Iran. This act seemed strange from the off but this was what was according to Trump the right way to deal with the Iranians. Rather than push diplomacy to the core, Trump unleashed sanctions on an adversary nation. This also goes on to show a difference of method in both regimes of Trump and Obama.

But also, the Trump administration went on to withdraw from other multilateral agreements such as the Paris climate change agreement and the North Atlantic Free Trade agreement (NAFTA). There wasn't much explanation either other than the need to make America's foreign policy interests first. This also marked a major shift from the Obama regime's preference for multilateral agreements as against going by unilaterally.

CONCLUSION

In addition, the Trump regime had started a trade war with allies in Europe, and supposedly adversary nations in Asia such as China. This in my opinion has worked to the detriment of both parties as they will look to lose a lot of trade incentives with higher tariffs in place for goods from both sides of the Atlantic and the Pacific. The era of strategic patience had come to an end and direct diplomacy has taken over in the events that has happened since the change in regimes from Obama to Trump. The tale as it is has had two ends with each possessing its merits and demerits.

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