

America the Punitive

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Global Research, August 16, 2018

[Strategic Culture Foundation](#)

Region: [Middle East & North Africa, Russia and FSU](#)

Theme: [Intelligence, US NATO War Agenda](#)

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There has been a dramatic shift in how the United States government carries out its business internationally. Admittedly, Washington has had a tendency to employ force to get what it has wanted ever since 9/11, but it also sometimes recognized that other countries had legitimate interests and accepted there was a place for diplomacy to resolve issues short of armed conflict. The Bush Administration reluctance to broaden its engagement in the Middle East after it recognized that it had blundered with Iraq followed by Obama's relaxation of tensions with Cuba and his negotiation of a nuclear agreement with Iran demonstrated that sanity sometimes prevailed in the West Wing.

That willingness to be occasionally accommodating has changed dramatically, with the State Department under Mike Pompeo currently more prone to deliver threats than any suggestions that we all might try to get along. It would be reasonable enough to criticize such behavior because it is intrinsically wrong, but the truly frightening aspect of it would appear to be that it is based on the essentially neoconservative assumption that other countries will always back down when confronted with force majeure and that the use of violence as a tool in international relations is, ultimately, consequence free.

I am particularly disturbed with the consequence free part as it in turn is rooted in the belief that countries that have been threatened or even invaded have no collective memory of what occurred and will not respond vengefully when the situation changes. There have been a number of stunningly mindless acts of aggression over the past several weeks that are particularly troubling as they suggest that they will produce many more problems down the road than solutions.

The most recent is the [new sanctioning](#) of Russia over the Skripal poisoning in Salisbury England. For those not following developments, last week Washington abruptly and [without any new evidence being presented](#), imposed additional trade sanctions on Russia in the belief that Moscow ordered and carried out the poisoning of Sergey Skripal and his daughter Yulia on March 4th. The report of the new sanctions was particularly surprising as Yulia Skripal has [recently announced](#) that she intends to return to her home in Russia, leading to the conclusion that even one of the alleged victims does not believe the narrative being promoted by the British and American governments.

Though Russian President Vladimir Putin has responded with restraint, avoiding a tit-for-tat, he is reported to be angry about the new move by the US government and now believes it to be an unreliable negotiating partner. Considering the friendly recent exchanges between Putin and Trump, the punishment of Russia has to be viewed as something of a surprise,

suggesting that the president of the United States may not be in control of his own foreign policy.

Turkey is also feeling America's wrath over the continued detention of an American Protestant Pastor Andrew Brunson by Ankara over charges that he was connected to the coup plotters of 2016, which were allegedly directed by Fetullah Gulen, a Muslim religious leader, who now resides in Pennsylvania. Donald Trump has made the detention [the centerpiece](#) of his Turkish policy, introducing sanctions and tariffs that have led in part to a collapse of the Turkish lira and a run on the banking system which could easily lead to default and grave damage to European banks that hold a large party of the country's debt.

And then there is perennial favorite Iran, which was hit with [reinstated sanctions](#) last week and is confronting a ban on oil sales scheduled to go into effect on November 4th. The US has said it will sanction any country that buys Iranian oil after that date, though a number of governments including Turkey, India and China appear to be prepared to defy that demand. Several European countries are reportedly preparing mechanisms that will allow them to trade around US restrictions.

What do Russia, Turkey and Iran have in common? All are on the receiving end of punitive action by the United States over allegations of misbehavior that have not been demonstrated. Nobody has shown that Russia poisoned the Skripals, Turkey just might have a case that the Reverend Brunson was in contact with coup plotters, and Iran is in full compliance with the nuclear arms agreement signed in 2015. One has to conclude that the United States has now become the ultimate angry imperial power, lashing out with the only thing that seems to work – its ability to interfere in and control financial markets – to punish nations that do not play by its rules. Given Washington's diminishing clout worldwide, it is a situation that is unsustainable and which will ultimately only really punish the American people as the United States becomes more isolated and its imperial overreach bankrupts the nation. As America weakens, Russia, Turkey, Iran and all the other countries that have been steamrolled by Washington will likely seek revenge. To avoid that, a dramatic course correction by the US is needed, but, unfortunately, is unlikely to take place.

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