

Trump Pulls Troops Out of Syria in Desperate Attempt to Save His Presidency, Causing Geopolitical Earthquake

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On December 19, Donald Trump announced in a Twitter message: “Our boys, our young women, our men, they’re all coming back and they’re coming back now. We won”. Shortly thereafter, Pentagon spokeswoman Dana White said in a statement: “We have started the process of returning US troops home from Syria as we transition to the next phase of the campaign”.

The reasons for Donald Trump’s move are many, but they are mainly driven by US domestic concerns. The temperature is heating up for Trump following the midterms, as the Democrats prepare to take command of the House of Representatives in January, something that Trump had always hoped to avert. He surrounded himself with generals, in the forlorn hope that this would somehow protect him. If the last two years of his presidency were constantly under the cloud of Mueller’s investigation, or insinuations of being an agent of Putin, from January 2019 the situation is going to get much more complicated. The Democratic electoral base is baying for the President’s impeachment, the party already in full pre-primary mode, with more than 20 candidates competing, with the incumbent of the White House offering the rallying cry.

The combination of these factors has forced Trump to change gears, considering that the military -industrial -intelligence -media- complex has always been ready to get rid of Trump, even in favor of a President Pence. The only option available for Trump in order to have a chance of reelection in 2020 is to undertake a self-promotion tour, a practice in which he has few peers, and which will involve him repeating his mantra of “Promises Made, Promises Kept”. He will list how he has fought against the fake-news media, suffered internal sabotage, as well as other efforts (from the Fed, the FBI, and Mueller himself) to hamper his efforts to “Make America Great Again”.

Trump has perhaps understood that in order to be re-elected, he must pursue a simple media strategy that will have a direct impact on his base. Withdrawing US troops from Syria, and partly from Afghanistan, serves this purpose. It is an easy way to win with his constituents, while it is a heavy blow to his fiercest critics in Washington who are against this decision. Given that 70% of Americans think that the war in Afghanistan was a mistake, the more that the mainstream media attacks Trump for his decision to withdraw, the more they direct votes to Trump. In this sense, Trump’s move seems to be directed at a domestic rather than an international audience.

The decision to get out of Syria is timed to coincide with another move that will also very much please Trump's base. The government shutdown is a result of the Democrats refusing to fund Trump's campaign promise to build a wall on the Mexican border. It is not difficult to understand that the average citizen is fed up with the useless wars in the Middle East, and Trump's words on immigration resonate with his voters. The more the media, the Democrats and the deep state criticize Trump on the wall, on the Syria pull out and on shutting down the government, the more they are campaigning for him.

This is why in order to understand the withdrawal of the United States from Syria it is necessary to see things from Trump's perspective, even as frustrating, confusing and incomprehensible that may seem at times.

The difference this time around was that the decision to withdraw US troops from Syria was Trump's alone, not something imposed on him by the generals that surround him. The choice to announce to his base, via Twitter, a victory against ISIS and the immediate withdrawal of US troops was a smart election move with an eye on the 2020 election.

It is possible that Trump, as is his wont, also wanted to send a message to his alleged French and British allies present in the northeast of Syria alongside the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and US soldiers. Trump may be now taunting: "Let's see what you can do without the US!"

It is as if Trump is admonishing these countries in a more concrete way for not lifting their weight in terms of military spending. Trump is vindictive and is not averse, after taking advantage of his opponent, to kicking him once he is down. Trump could be correct in this regard, and maybe French and British forces will be forced to withdraw their small group of 400 to 500 illegal occupiers of Syrian territory. Macron has for now reacted angrily at Trump's decision, intensifying the division between the two, and is adamant that the French military presence in Syria will continue.

There is also a more refined reason to justify the US withdrawal, even if Trump is probably unaware of it. The problem in these cases is always trying to peer through the fog of war and propaganda in order to discern the clear, unadulterated truth.

We should begin by listing the winners and losers of the Syrian conflict. Damascus, Moscow, Tehran and Hezbollah have won the war against aggression. Riyadh, Doha, Paris, London, Tel Aviv and Washington, with their al Qaeda, Daesh and Jabhat al-Nusra terrorist proxies, failed to destroy Syria, and following seven years of effort, are forced to scurry away in defeat.

Those who are walking a tightrope between war and defeat are Ankara and the so-called SDF. The withdrawal of the United States has confirmed the balance on the ledger of winners and losers, with the clock counting down for Erdogan and the SDF to make their next determinative move.

The enemies of Syria survive thanks to repeated bluffs. The Americans of the military-industrial-intelligence apparatus maintain the pretence that they still have an influence in Syria, what with troops on the ground, attacking Trump for withdrawing. In fact, since the Russians have imposed a no-fly-zone across the country, with the S-300 systems and other sophisticated equipment that integrate the Syrian air-defenses into the Russian air defenses, US coalition planes are for all intents and purposes grounded, and the same goes

for the Israelis.

Of course the French and British in Syria are infected with the same delusional disease, choosing to believe that they can count for something without the US presence. We will see in the near future whether they also withdraw their illegal presence from Syria.

The biggest bluff of all probably comes from Erdogan, who for months threatened to invade Syria to fight ISIS, the Kurds, or any other plausible excuse to invade a sovereign country for the purposes of advancing his dreams of expanding Turkish territory as far as Idlib (which Erdogan considers a province of Turkey). Such an invasion, however, is unlikely to happen, as it would unite the SDF, Damascus and her allies to reject the Turkish advance on Syrian territory.

The Kurds in turn seem to have only one option left, namely, a forced negotiation with Damascus to give back to the Syrian people, in exchange for protection, the control of their territory that is rich in oil and gas.

Erdogan wants to eliminate the SDF, and until now, the only thing that stood in his way was the US military presence. He even threatened to attack several times, even in spite of the presence of US troops. Ankara has long been on a collision course with NATO countries on account of this. By removing US troops, Trump imagines, relations between Turkey and the US may also improve. This of course is of little interest to the US deep state, since Erdogan, like Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), is considered unsuitable, and is accordingly branded a "dictator".

Trump probably believes that with this move, as with his defense of MBS concerning Khashoggi, that he can try and establish a strong personal friendship with Erdogan. There are even talks about the sale of Patriot systems to the Turks and the extradition of Gulen.

When Will They Leave, and Cui Prodest?

It remains to be confirmed when and to what extent US troops will leave Syria. If the US had no voice in the future in Syria, with 2,000 men on the ground, now it has even less. Leaving behind 200 to 300 special forces and CIA operatives, together with another 400 to 500 French and British personnel, will, once they are captured with their Daesh and al Qaeda friends, be an excellent bargaining chip for Damascus, as they were in Aleppo.

The military-industrial-intelligence-media complex considers Trump's decision the worst of all possible moves. Mattis even resigned on account of this. The presence of US troops in Syria allowed the foreign-policy establishment to continue to formulate plans (and spend money to pay a lot of people in Washington) based on the delusion that they are doing something in Syria to change the course of events. For Israel, it is a double disaster, with Netanyahu desperate to survive, seeking to factor in expected elections in a now-or-never political move. Trump probably understands that Bibi is done for, and that at this point, the withdrawal of troops, fulfilling a fundamental electoral promise, counts more than Israeli money and his friendship to Bibi.

Erdogan has two options before him. On the one hand, he can act against the Kurds. On the other hand, he can sit down at the negotiating table with Damascus and the SDF, in an Astana format, guided by Iran and Russia. Putin and Rouhani are certainly pushing for this solution. Trump, on the other hand, would like to see Turkey enter Syria in the place of US

forces, to demonstrate he concluded a win-win deal for everyone, beating the deep-state at their own game.

Erdogan does not really have the military force necessary to enter Syria, which is the big secret. He would be against both the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) and the SDF, though the two not necessarily in an alliance.

There is a triple bluff going on, and this is what is complicating the situation so much. On the one hand, the SDF is bluffing in not wanting help from Damascus in case Erdogan sends in his forces; on the other hand, Erdogan is bluffing in suggesting he is able to conquer the territory held by the SDF; and finally, the French and British are bluffing by telling the SDF they will be able to help them against both Erdogan and/or Assad.

Iran, Russia, Syria are the only ones who do not need to bluff, because they occupy the best position – the commanding heights. They view Trump's decisions and his allies with distrust. They know very well that these are mostly moves for internal consumption by the enemies of Syria.

If the US withdraws, there is so much to be gained. The priority then becomes the west of Syria, sealing the borders with Jordan, removing the pockets of terrorists from the east, and securing the al-Tanf crossing. If the SDF will request protection from Damascus and will be willing to participate in the liberation of the country and its reconstruction, Erdogan will be done for, and this could lead to the total liberation of Idlib. It would be the best possible outcome, an important national reconciliation between two important parts of the population. It would give Damascus new economic impetus and prepare the Syrian people to expel the remaining invaders (ISIS and the FSA/ Turkish Armed Forces) from the country, both in Idlib and in the northeast in Afrin.

Russia is aware of the risk that Erdogan is running with the choices he will take in the coming days. Perhaps the reason why Putin chose diplomacy over war with Turkey after the downing of a Russian Su-24 in 2015 was in order to arrive at this precise moment, with as many elements as possible present to convince Erdogan to stick with Russia and Iran instead of embracing Trump's strategy and putting himself on an open collision course with Damascus, Moscow and Tehran.

Putin has always been five moves ahead. He is aware that the US could not stay long in Syria. He knows that France and the UK cannot support the SDF, and that the SDF cannot hold territory it holds in Syria without an agreement with Damascus. He is also conscious that Turkey does not have the strength to enter Syria and hold the territory if it did. It would only be able justify an advance on Idlib with the support of the Russian Air Force.

Putin has certainly made it clear to Erdogan that if he made such a move to attack the SDF and enter Syria, Russia in turn would militarily support the SAA with its air force to free Idlib; and in case of incidents with Turkey, the Russian armed forces would respond with all the interest earned from the unrequited downing of the Su-24 in 2015.

Erdogan has no choice. He must find an agreement with Damascus, and this is why he found himself commenting on Trump's words the following day, criticizing US sanctions on Iran in the presence of Iranian president Rouhani. The SDF know that they are between a rock and a hard place, and have already sent a delegation to start negotiations with Damascus.

Trump's move was driven by US domestic politics and aimed at the 2020 elections. But in doing so, Trump inevitably called out once and for all the bluffs built by Syria's enemies, infuriating in the process the neoliberal imperialist establishment, revealing how each of these factions has no more cards to play and is in actual fact destined for defeat.

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