



Strategic Costs of the Muslim Ban

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The Trump Administration's first week has clearly exposed both its limited depth in strategic thinking and, worse, its lack of commitment to US leadership around the world that successive administrations have tirelessly toiled to establish and preserve since the Second World War. President Donald Trump's pronouncements during his campaign, after winning the presidency and since his inauguration, have confirmed a myopic vision for American interests and almost wanton neglect of whatever repercussions his policy choices are likely to engender in the future. To be sure, what appear to be [presidential proclamations and executive orders](#) aimed at satisfying a domestic audience that bought into his xenophobic vision are real policy prescriptions that, in due course, will prove to be ill-advised, ill-considered, ill-timed, and poorly executed.

From reinstating the [Mexico City policy](#), to ordering the construction of a physical barrier on the US-Mexican border and threatening to rescind the [North American Free Trade Agreement \(NAFTA\)](#), to withdrawing from negotiations for the [Trans-Pacific Partnership \(TPP\)](#), to the abrupt and immediate ban on entry by citizens from seven Muslim-majority countries, the president's actions point to a drifting American foreign policy that will soon find itself tasked with trying to ameliorate the needless damage caused by executive overreach. Indeed, if the United States wants to remain consequential in the world, American foreign policy officials worth their training and prestige will be required to expend endless time and effort rebuilding frayed alliances, recapturing lost diplomatic territory, and defending essential interests in hitherto pivotal international arenas, especially in the Middle East.

A Weakening Strategic Posture

President Trump's [America First](#) policy may make a lot of sense to his adherents since it claims to emphasize the prioritization of American national interests. But whether understood as a benign nationalist slogan to defend said interests against a supposedly predatory world governed by chaos, or as a deeper isolationism to preserve a special exceptionalism, the policy at this juncture of the twenty-first century will undoubtedly result in ceding essential advantages that made that exceptionalism possible in the first place. Essentially, and given the many challengers to American leadership around the world—whether they are upstarts or old-time competitors—what may be lost while the United States retrenches or simply puts its house in order will not be easily regained. In fact, if the Trump Administration promises that it will negotiate better deals with the world, it may soon find that its potential partners have looked for and found other willing associates.

The larger strategic landscape which the United States has so assiduously safeguarded since WWII—indeed, the American hegemony that has defined the postwar order—is at risk of being overtaken by both insufficient attention from Washington and daring machinations by adversaries. Since the start of his presidential campaign, Trump has disparaged Europe’s commitment to securing and strengthening the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and has not retreated from calls to make amends with Russia despite its clearly antagonistic and belligerent behavior. It indeed was left to the former Obama Administration to bolster the alliance by [deploying](#) armor and special forces to Poland and other states bordering Russia after the latter sent nuclear-capable missiles and anti-ship launchers to its Kaliningrad enclave that borders Poland and Lithuania on the Baltic Sea. If advisors to the president, the American Congress, and the foreign policy establishment do not stand firm on opposing Russia’s belligerent policy in Europe, and if they approve of the possible lifting of sanctions on Moscow imposed after its invasion of Ukraine and annexation of Crimea, President Vladimir Putin will likely understand that as a blank check to do as he pleases across the continent.

President Trump’s order to withdraw from negotiations for the TPP is another example of a foreign policy dictated by domestic considerations to the detriment of strategic interests. While many in the United States saw the trade deal as harmful to workers’ rights and employment, the withdrawal threw the future of the pact into disarray. Importantly, other partner countries are currently [discussing](#) the possibility of inviting China to participate in it, thus giving Beijing a powerful position vis-à-vis the United States—in addition to its challenge to the American presence and role across the Pacific Ocean. That the Trump Administration saw fit to pull out of the partnership, instead of staying in it to re-negotiate its provisions, indicates a shortsightedness that will likely lead to the loss of a strategic footprint and the beginning of a recession of America’s leadership in the area.

Another example of a drifting foreign policy that is likely to cause the United States dearly in its strategic posture is the ongoing yet needless dispute over a wall of separation with Mexico, promised in the heat of a cynical and opportunistic presidential campaign. What indeed is worse is the expectation that the neighbor to the south would willingly pay for the construction of what is arguably a harebrained idea incapable of protecting the United States. In addition, the president has indicated that he is considering rescinding and re-negotiating NAFTA, an agreement that has governed much of American economic policy with Mexico and Canada for almost 25 years. If withdrawal from negotiating the TPP deprives the United States of influence over economic policy in East Asia, rethinking NAFTA as Mexican-American relations are on the rocks will most likely spell a point of no return for US influence even over its own borders.

But just as importantly is the general and palpable feeling of distrust around the world of American foreign policy and retreat. Indeed, the “America First” policy has relegated everyone to an undesired position: that of competitor—if not adversary—in the eyes of the Trump Administration.

Such a situation will not augur well for diplomatic, economic, military, and other relations the United States has diligently worked to preserve over the decades.

The Muslim Ban as Final Catalyst

If, for a long time, American foreign policy has been seen by the Arab world as opportunistic at best, after the ban on Muslim entrants into the country it will be understood as legitimization of thus far a minority opinion depicting the United States and the West as enemies. With the stroke of a pen and a dangerous cynicism, the Trump Administration has deprived many in the Arab and Muslim worlds of rational arguments against radicalism. This executive order also delegitimized the United States' role in fighting polarizing sectarianism, since the president pledged specifically to defend Christians. It also has potentially decreased the welcoming environment for American military personnel wherever they are deployed and may compromise their ability to secure local assistance in intelligence gathering and operations.

President Trump's temporary ban on the entry of people (refugees, immigrants, students, and others) from seven Muslim-majority nations (Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen) puts tens of thousands of vulnerable individuals in limbo and may very well increase their susceptibility to dangers. Thousands of traumatized Syrians who have seen tragedies and calamities since the start of the Syrian civil war in 2011 now watch as their hope for resettlement in the United States is suspended, although only [12,000 of them](#) had been resettled by August of 2016. Their vetting process was always rigorous and they had to wait in refugee camps for up to two years before being admitted. The ban also threw thousands of other refugees and migrants from other countries in uncertainty, despite federal judges' [temporary vacating](#) of some provisions of the president's executive order. It is important to note that no refugees were responsible for actions detrimental to US public security. In fact, a [study](#) published by the CATO Institute in 2016 stated that "the chance of an American being murdered in a terrorist attack caused by a refugee is 1 in 3.64 *billion* per year while the chance of being murdered in an attack committed by an illegal immigrant is an astronomical 1 in 10.9 *billion* per year." (Emphasis in original.)

More generally, and in addition to the moral repercussions on America's standing as a promoter of equal rights, democracy, and diversity, the ban is an affirmation that US foreign policy today is the closest approximation to a clash of civilizations between the West and the Islamic world. It also has serious and detrimental effects on the American war on extremism, itself made more imminent by a presidential executive order on January 28, 2017 to the American military to [devise](#) a plan in 30 days to defeat the Islamic State (IS). Indeed, the millennial ideology espoused by IS, al-Qaeda, and their offshoots from Syria to Libya may have just found the necessary validation among those prone to seeing the world in binary terms; in essence, this is a repetition of the same conditions that gave rise and resilience to al-Qaeda in Iraq after 2003, which later morphed into the Islamic State.

In general, Muslims and Muslim youth have just been served a healthy dose of hatred for the United States and the West. Stranded refugees and immigrants in the thousands will soon become unwitting tools in the propaganda of jihadists, who are anxious to portray themselves as the protectors of Islam and defenders of the Muslim *ummah* (community). Thus, the Islamic State can now easily pose questions to the masses of vulnerable nationals of the excluded countries and others about the efficacy of opening up their societies to ideas of inclusiveness, plurality, and understanding of other cultures and civilizations. Even Muslims in the West are now more likely to feel more fearful and insecure about their status, a distinct possibility that may lead to more radicalization and more attacks in countries of the European Union—as occurred in Belgium, France, Germany, and others—as well as in the United States.

On the ground—where American military personnel are either training local forces or conducting counter-insurgency operations, in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Somalia, and Libya—the ban may very well make cooperation more difficult. As the ban took effect following the issuance of the presidential order, Iraqi interpreters, who had worked with American forces during the occupation of Iraq, were prevented from entering US airports to join their settled families. It will indeed be difficult to convince soldiers or fighters in the targeted countries who are participating in anti-ISIL operations that they are on an equal footing with American soldiers. It will be just as difficult to recruit others for dangerous missions in northern Iraq and Syria if their reward is likely to be a future life threatened by their collaboration with a military force, in whose country they will not be allowed.

By the same token, the ban may effect a dangerous situation for American military deployments in Somalia and Djibouti, where the US Navy deploys an expeditionary force, and along the Arabian Sea-Gulf of Aden-Red Sea corridor, considering that East Africa has until recently been a major area for piracy operations. Both Somalia and Yemen constitute important battlefields for American forces—indeed, an American commando [was killed and three others were injured](#) in Yemen in an operation on January 29, 2017, against al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula—and preventing their citizens from traveling to the United States may lessen the degree of their cooperation with American forces.

Finally, while the administration has no qualms about upsetting relations with Iran—which [reciprocated](#) to the US ban of its nationals with a ban of its own on Americans visiting Iran, except for visa holders—Trump's move only throws oil on the fire in future relations with the Islamic Republic. The executive order will simply be used there as a trenchant tool for which ultra-conservatives have been searching to gut reformist President Hassan Rouhani's agenda for opening up to the West and possibly to dissuade him from seeking another term in June 2017. Importantly, the Iranian leadership in its many stripes will most likely use the ban as justification for gearing up for a military confrontation in the Arabian Gulf to fend against what every Iranian official believes to be an impending collision course with the United States.

Redirecting an Errant Foreign Policy

As American foreign policy lurches from one ill-advised executive proclamation to another, American strategic interests around the world and in the Middle East become exposed to further unwarranted and unwanted repercussions that can be reversed only by a steady hand in the State Department and other decision-making institutions. Neither a nonchalant attitude about such interests nor unwise executive orders and announcements about essential matters— from Asia to the Middle East and the Americas—should be allowed to stand. It is thus incumbent that a public and unified response should coalesce around legitimate and effective strategies to preserve the role of grassroots organizations in American foreign policy decision-making and defend against executive overreach.

It must also be understood that no ban on Muslims will help ameliorate the general feeling of insecurity spanning gullible segments of the American public that were fed, at best, bogus justifications for a beneficial American isolationism. While it is obviously late to undo the results of a contentious presidential election, it remains true that legal and constitutional measures may bear the best fruit in reversing the decision to ban refugees and immigrants and preventing further damage to American strategic interests. It is also important to call on the Arab and Muslim worlds to make their voices heard regarding important humanitarian concerns that, given the misguided nature of the present American administration, may extend into other areas of strategic relevance.