

Analysis

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Unfettered by advisers, Trump's presidency gets less predictable

On Monday, having effectively and unexpectedly given the green light to a Turkish military incursion against America's sometime Syrian Kurdish allies, US President Donald Trump took to Twitter once again. If Turkey took any action that he in his "great and unmatched wisdom", considered to be off-limits, he would "totally destroy and obliterate" its economy.

Even by Trump's standards, his approach to Turkey and Syria has been a rollercoaster. What would normally be heavily discussed and planned policy decisions have increasingly simply been blasted out on Twitter, to the clear alarm of America's allies. According to reports, some decisions have even come as surprises to America's own military, which finds itself racing to catch up with a president who appears to take pride in unpredictable decisions and disdains a thought-through strategy.

Where earlier in his presidency Trump was still sometimes constrained by those around him - particularly the trio of senior former and serving generals who held key roles - he now seems to be acting on his own. His senior officials, it seems, most often simply do what they can to catch up. That includes correcting themselves or deleting awkward statements when events catch them out. Defense Secretary Mark Esper erased a tweet in which he said the Pentagon did not endorse a Turkish operation in Syria after Trump appeared to say the opposite.

Given Trump's varied and contradictory statements, it is likely none of the key players - Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, America's now abandoned Kurdish allies from the Syrian Democratic Forces, other Middle Eastern and European states, and anyone else - really know where he stands. But that may be the intent. What the president did make clear in an earlier Twitter storm, however, was that he felt America should not really care. It was 7,000 miles away, and he had been elected to end these "ridiculous, endless foreign wars".

Messy war

That's a message that may well resonate ahead of next year's US presidential election. By early evening, the president was himself re-tweeting others saying he was doing the right thing by keeping the United States out of a messy Turkish-Kurdish war.

What is equally clear, however, is that Trump's actions - both in this case and elsewhere - increasingly run contrary to the advice and instincts of an entire generation of US foreign policy and national security thinkers. Indeed, the cornerstone of America's approach to the world since 1945 has been standing by its allies, even though sometimes imperfectly. Trump's "America first" approach explicitly views them as expendable. Evidence suggests the US president views his most senior advisers and officials in much the same way. In the Atlantic this month, "Black Hawk Down" author Mark Bowden recounts mostly anonymous interviews with senior US military figures who have worked with Trump. Sometimes with wry amusement, sometimes with outright horror, they describe a president who disdains expertise, trusts only his own instincts and was "reflexively contrary".

That was explosive enough in the first half of his presidency, when he chafed against the advice of top officials such as former Marines White House Chief of Staff John Kelly and Defense Secretary James Mattis. When National Security Advisor Lieutenant General H R McMaster delivered a multipage global strategy based on Trump's "America First" rhetoric, the president was effusive. But no one believes he read it. Now, he seemingly feels the need for advice less than ever.

Impeachment

For Trump, all diplomatic relationships are unambiguously transactional - and he sees no problem in including his own domestic and political priorities in those deals. That has alarmed officials and opened the door to impeachment proceedings after he apparently pushed Ukraine to investigate potential Democratic challenger Joe Biden and his family. But Trump knows he can almost certainly beat such proceedings given the Republican majority in the Senate, and there are no signs he cares what anybody else thinks.

Chinese officials were reportedly alarmed last week when Trump publicly suggested that Beijing should also investigate the Bidens. But the most revealing detail in Trump's dealings with President Xi Jinping comes from a reported telephone call, in which the US president clearly implied he would remain quiet about protests in Hong Kong provided progress was made towards a trade deal.

Those who want to influence Trump are always looking for ways to curry favour, from buying advertising on the Fox News shows he watches to doing business with his family firms. — Reuters

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Aerial view shows trucks queuing along the BR163 highway, in Moraes Almeida district, Itaituba, Para state, Brazil, in the Amazon rainforest, on Sept 11, 2019. — AFP

Highways drive Amazon development, destruction

Trucker Erik Fransuer spends months at a time driving back and forth on highways that cut through the Amazon in northern Brazil, delivering soy or corn to river ports. Fransuer is one of thousands of truckers plying the BR230 and BR163, major transport routes that have played a key role in the development and destruction of the world's largest rainforest, now being ravaged by fires. "I like the freedom of being on the road," Fransuer, 26, says as he and other drivers relax in hammocks strung up between trucks parked side by side at a gasoline station in the dust-blown town of Rurópolis.

Fransuer spends at least 12 hours a day sitting in his big rig listening to fast-paced music as he bounces along the highways constructed nearly 50 years ago - and somehow still not finished. Meter-wide potholes, bone-jarring corrugations, rickety wooden bridges and billowing red dust that wipes out visibility along dirt sections of the mostly two-lane roads make them hazardous to navigate at the best of times. "That way, there's no road," says Fransuer, gesturing in the direction of the BR163 connecting Rurópolis and Santarém, which until recently was a rough dirt track.

But it is changing. Eager to develop the Amazon to bolster Brazil's weak economy, President Jair Bolsonaro's government this year plans to finish asphaltting the 1,770-km BR163 stretching north from Cuiabá - the capital of the central-west state of Mato Grosso, Brazil's grain-growing powerhouse - to Santarém. Road workers are also paving sections of the more than 4,000-km BR230, known as the Trans-Amazonian highway, which cuts across the rainforest from the Atlantic coast city of Joao Pessoa to Labrea in the west. Single-lane wooden bridges, barely able to support trucks hauling trailers loaded with 30 tons of grain, are also being replaced with concrete spans. "There are a lot of accidents, a lot of deaths here," says Darlei da Silva, as he toils in intense heat to install a new bridge on the BR230. It is one of 18 being built along the highway, he says. "It's really going to improve things."

Deforestation

The highways were built by the military dictatorship in the early 1970s to populate the remote region, which it

Phone calls with Trump: More risky venture than boon

Arranging a phone call with the president of the United States used to be seen as a diplomatic win. But increasingly it comes with serious risks, from transcript leaks to domestic political blowback, and advisers are growing wary. The fallout from Trump's July 25th call with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy is still reverberating in Kiev and has led to the opening of an impeachment inquiry in Washington.

US lawmakers leading the inquiry now want access to Trump's calls with Russian President Vladimir Putin and some other world leaders, with the chairman of the US House Intelligence Committee citing concerns that Trump may have jeopardized national security. "People have to adjust to the fact that a phone call with Trump is not the same as a phone call with any normal leader," said Gerard Araud, the French ambassador in Washington until last June, who helped organize a number of calls between President Emmanuel Macron and the White House.

For any world leader who has spoken to Trump, the idea that verbatim transcripts could be released is a worrying prospect and likely to alter how such calls - a lifeblood of international diplomacy - play out in the future. Yet Araud suggested leaks were perhaps the least of leaders' concerns, citing Trump's tendency to veer into unexpected territory, destabilizing his interlocutor. "If you want to make progress on policy, that's a real problem. Every head of state and government has had to adjust to this non-dialogue," he said. "Everything has been blown out of the water."

Greater care

The warning signs were arguably there from the beginning. A few days after Trump took office in January 2017, he held a call with then Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull. At one point in the testy exchange Trump told Turnbull "You're worse than I am", and complained that a US migration deal with Australia "shows me to be a dope". The transcript was leaked to the Washington Post and caused Turnbull, who stood up to Trump during the call, problems at home for his staunch anti-immigration line.

Last week, the US Justice Department confirmed Trump had held calls with leaders other than Zelenskyy to ask them to help Attorney General William Barr with his wide-ranging inquiry into the origins of Robert Mueller's investigation into Russia's role in the 2016 presidential election. The leaders were not named, but Prime Minister Scott Morrison confirmed he had spoken to Trump about it. The British government said

saw as deserted - notwithstanding the indigenous tribes and traditional communities living there - and vulnerable to foreign invasion. Deforestation followed as a wave of pioneers - rural poor enticed to the rainforest on the promise of land and a better future - began clearing jatoba, itauba, marupa and cedar for their crops. It accelerated in the following decades as cattle breeders, soy farmers and illegal loggers slashed their way deeper into the Amazon basin, where more than 20 million people now live.

During a recent trip to Para, where Rurópolis is located, an AFP team drove past swaths of land stripped of trees and ranches with names such as "My Dream" or "Good View". Where virgin forest once stood, herds of Brahman cattle graze on pasture or huge machines harvest grain. Newly deforested areas were scorched by recent blazes that singed the primary forest, despite a burning ban in the Amazon following an international outcry. The smell of smoke hung in the air until the rains finally came.

The highways, and dirt roads branching off them, have fueled illicit activities in the region, such as wildcat mining and land grabs. "In our research... in the Trans-Amazonian and BR163 areas, we found that the moment you open a road, you enable deforestation of around 100 kilometers along those roads, meaning 50 kilometers on one side and 50 kilometers on the other," Socorro Pena, a former researcher at the Amazon Environmental Research Institute, tells AFP. "Big roads and big infrastructure projects are causing a high rate of deforestation and environmental problems, and are really hurting the local population."

Slow going

The more than 2,000-km round trip from Sinop in Mato Grosso to ports in Miratuba or Santarém in neighboring Para should take truckers three days. But they often end up spending several days queued up at terminals on the Tapajós River waiting to unload, with port operators overwhelmed by China's insatiable demand for Brazilian soy. Travel times are even worse during the wet season from November to June, when sections of the highways turn into thick mud, or when hundreds of wild-

cat miners block a highway for days to demand legal status, like they did recently in Moraes Almeida, which straddles the BR163. Fransuer, who has been driving for six years, says he sees on average 10 truck accidents a day owing to the poor conditions. The number of trucks on the highways is expected to explode in the coming years as grain operators build more ports. As many as 6,000 trucks are expected to pull up daily at Miratuba ports in the next five years, once the number of terminals triples to 15, says the mayor of Itaituba, Valmir Climaco de Aguiar. That compares with the current 1,500 trucks a day.

Dirt and dust

Highway and port upgrades will cut transport costs for grain growers in Mato Grosso, who will be able to export more of their crops through terminals in the north instead of the south, which are further away from their farms. But not everyone in Para feels they are benefiting. Locals fear increased truck traffic will make the highways more dangerous and churn up more dust that already leaves a red stain on everything. "I do my washing at night when there are fewer cars on the road" to avoid the dust, says Dayana Rodrigues Melo, a mother of four in Rurópolis, where streets are unpaved.

Temperatures have risen in the region as a result of deforestation, locals say. Expanding farming has also driven up land and house prices, and replaced food crops that previously supplied the local market, says Sandro Leao, an economics professor at the Federal University of Western Para. Wages and employment, however, have not kept pace. And cell phone service is non-existent outside the big towns. "The economic model... which uses the northern logistical area for transport, favors mainly those involved in the export business," Leao says. "That means the ranchers, exporting firms, big traders and grain exporters." Better infrastructure is also good news for truckers like Fransuer. They get paid around 1,000 reais (\$240) for each load delivered to port. It could enable Fransuer to do more trips a month and better support his young family, who live elsewhere in the northeastern state of Paraíba. "It's hard," he says. — AFP

Life of misery for Brazil's Amazon pioneers

Maria Helena Locatelli was promised land and a better future in the Amazon rainforest, but all she got was misery when she arrived in northern Brazil in 1972 to start a new life. Locatelli was part of a wave of pioneers who moved to the fringes of the Trans-Amazonian highway, after it was constructed by the military dictatorship to populate a region the regime saw as vulnerable to foreign invasion. Under the slogan "Give land without men to men without land," the government promised the rural poor 100 hectares of land and a house if they moved to the rainforest.

Everyone believed the propaganda, recalls Locatelli - until they arrived in the Amazon, where they discovered "there was nothing". "It wasn't true, it was a big lie," says Locatelli, 71, who was living in Rio Grande do Sul when she and her ex-husband Orlando heard the government's call on the radio to occupy the Amazon, several thousand kilometers away. Locatelli was 25 and pregnant with twins when the couple arrived in Para state with their two young children.

Conditions were dire. But having sold their home and everything in it, Locatelli says they could not afford to go back. For months, they slept on a dirt floor in a shed with other new arrivals. "There were people from Bahia, there were people from Ceara, Fortaleza, there were people from Rio Grande do Sul," Locatelli recalls. Eventually they received a block of dense virgin forest near Rurópolis - a three-hour drive from Santarém, where she now lives - but the house and furniture promised by the government did not exist. There was no running water, malaria was rife, and their crops failed. "It was misery," says Locatelli. "There was a lot of suffering. A lot of people died."

Locatelli's ex-husband bought a chainsaw to cut down trees on the block allocated to them and earned money by clearing land for others. It was the start of widespread deforestation in the region that accelerated over the following decades as cattle breeders and grain growers pushed deeper into the rainforest. Within a few months, Orlando was seriously injured in a tree-felling accident that killed another man, forcing Locatelli to become the family's breadwinner.

Despite only having a few years of primary school education, Locatelli enrolled in a teacher training course and worked at the roadside community's school. Locatelli consoled herself that other families were worse off than hers. "I had to stand firm and confront life," she says. "I didn't let us starve." — AFP

He said those talking to Trump needed to be businesslike and "just the facts", avoiding exchanges like Zelenskyy's, in which the Ukrainian at times comes across as almost fawning. Araud underscored that point, saying he had advised Macron to avoid responding to Trump's provocations. "My advice to Macron, on Twitter at least, was not to react, because Trump will double down and you will lose."

Britain's relations with the United States are still affected by the leak to a British newspaper in July of a cable highly critical of Trump written by Kim Darroch, the former British ambassador to Washington. Trump responded by calling Darroch "wacky" and "very stupid" on Twitter. The ambassador resigned days later. "Diplomats can't really do their job if there is a significant risk of their honest, unfiltered judgments being leaked to the media," said Peter Westmacott, a former British ambassador to Washington and Paris. "Diplomats need to know that this has not become the new normal." — Reuters