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President Trump versus his Administration

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The dynamic evident when President Donald Trump commented on the annual risk assessment prepared by the US intelligence community, seen also following the President's decision to withdraw US troops from Syria, reflects the President's current modus operandi vis-à-vis his administration. Processes unfold along two parallel tracks: on the one hand, using Tweets, the President promotes a policy that matches his approach on any given issue; on the other hand, administration systems are poised to minimize damage and provide appropriate responses to the geopolitical ramifications of the President's decisions. The internal pressures the President will likely face in 2019 and his need to demonstrate success in handling these pressures will presumably only reinforce his tendency to make surprising, unpredictable decisions, at least some of which might contradict or even harm Israeli interests.

Daniel R. Coats, US Director of National Intelligence (DNI), recently issued the United States intelligence community's annual report. The dynamic evident in President Donald Trump's response to the publication and to related statements in various US media, seen also following the President's decision to withdraw US troops from Syria, reflects the President's current familiar modus operandi vis-à-vis his administration. The US media chose to stress parts of the DNI report that seem to question the assessments and basic operating assumptions that have formed the foundation for a series of presidential foreign policy decisions and have led to fierce debate over their rationale, both within the United States and abroad.

Contrary to the President's assertion that the Islamic State has been defeated in Syria and Iraq, the DNI report states that despite the significant blows the organization has suffered, it will continue to pose a threat in the foreseeable future. As for Iran, contrary to the President's assessment that given the decision to leave the nuclear agreement and renew the sanctions "Iran is no longer the same country" and internally is in shambles, and it is only a matter of time until it agrees to renew negotiations, the DNI report asserts that Iran is upholding the agreement, civilian unrest is sporadic and uncoordinated, and Iran has ramped up its confrontational activities in the Middle East. Contrary to Trump's assessment that there is a good chance that his meetings with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un will lead to North Korea's nuclear disarmament, the DNI report stresses that the

intelligence community continues to assess that it is unlikely that North Korea will decide to give up the nuclear arms it already has, and is engaging in negotiations with the United States only to obtain concessions.

Trump's public disagreement with the US intelligence community, including the statement that its assessments on Iran are "naive" and that "perhaps intelligence should go back to school," is one of many symptoms of the decision making processes that are now routine in Washington. Even if the media are in a rush to highlight the flaws in the President's policies and often ignore developments that may reflect positive aspects of those policies, the source of the repeated misunderstandings and contradictions is not necessarily the media's desire to shine a negative light on his policies (or, as Trump would call it, "fake news"), but first and foremost the chaotic management of decision making processes that often lead to uncertainty and reflect reversals and inconsistency. It is becoming increasingly apparent that a Trump Tweet announcing a decision the President has unexpectedly may well take the administration's highest ranking members and other affected parties, in the United States and elsewhere, by surprise (e.g., in a Senate hearing, the CENTCOM commander responsible for US activities in Syria said that he had not been consulted about the withdrawal of troops from the country). The process that should have preceded the decision takes place only afterwards.

The developments in the wake of Trump's decision to withdraw US troops from Syria afford an opportunity to examine the current US decision making process and its possible effect on methods of action that national leaders adopt when they pursue policies involving the United States.

An internal discussion on the withdrawal of troops from Syria took place in the US administration only after a telephone call between Trump and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and a string of Tweets the US President issued announcing the decision. The discussion focused on the need to provide a response to a decision that had already been taken and to minimize its fallout. Furthermore, the events occurring during the visits to the Middle East by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and National Security Advisor John Bolton did not manage to bridge the gaps evident between Trump's position and that of administration's leaders. Contrary to Trump's declarations, Bolton, during his visit to the region, publicly presented a list of conditions for such a withdrawal. This led the Turkish President to instigate a crisis and cancel a planned meeting with Bolton after the National Security Advisor had already arrived in Ankara. The crisis was resolved only after a phone call between Trump and Erdogan, which made no reference to Bolton's conditions.

These developments demonstrate that US administration policy in general, and its foreign policy in particular, is conducted along two parallel tracks. On the one hand, using Tweets, the President promotes a policy on any given issue; on the other hand, and in tandem, government systems are poised to minimize damage and provide appropriate responses to the geopolitical ramifications of the President's decisions. Moreover, the recurring features at important decision making junctures have made world leaders understand that the President's considerations are not always congruent with the considerations of his administration's highest ranking members; therefore, matters ought to be concluded directly with the President, as deliberations with administration officials are superfluous or even detrimental. Again and again, it seems that more than anything, the President wants to prove that he keeps the promises he made during his election campaign (something Trump has admitted outright) and that he personally succeeds where others – especially his immediate predecessor, Barack Obama – have failed, even if he sometimes has to “correct” his initial decisions because of internal administration discussions.

As was the case after the publication of the DNI report, criticism is also mounting in the United States that Trump consistently ignores intelligence assessments if they are not in keeping with his beliefs. Only recently, Kim Jong Un succeeded in coordinating another summit meeting directly with Trump, even though there is no evidence that North Korea has taken any significant steps towards nuclear disarmament.

The administration's conduct has already had implications for Israel's interests. For example, the administration's bellicose rhetoric, used to stress its intentions to disrupt Iran's strengthening of its regional hold, is met with suspicions over the willingness and ability of the United States to dedicate resources to realize its objectives. Moreover, Trump's decision to withdraw US troops from Syria – after all senior administration members repeatedly stated that a US withdrawal was contingent on Iranian forces leaving the country – demonstrates that Trump is not broadcasting on the same frequency as his advisors and that, as far as he is concerned, the larger goal is to reduce US military involvement and certainly not to expand it.

The internal pressures Trump will likely face in 2019 and his need to demonstrate successes in handling these pressures will presumably only reinforce his tendency to make surprising, unpredictable decisions. This might directly affect issues at the core of Israel's interests.

Israel must recognize that over the next few months, President Trump will be making other decisions that he believes will serve his interests, but are in practice liable to contradict or even harm Israeli interests. Furthermore, often, the strategic discourse

conducted with various administration officials does not necessarily reflect the President's opinion and decisions. Possible gaps between Trump's position and Israel's could emerge with reference to "the deal of the century" on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and, even more so, on US responses to steps Iran might take following increased pressure. Should Iran decide to violate the nuclear agreement, including the decision to start enriching uranium to the 20 percent level and/or acquiesce to the US demand to enter into talks over a new agreement, Trump might view the required responses differently than Israel.