

Opinion **US foreign policy**

The end of Trumpsplaining

The pretence that America's leader is a grand strategist will not survive the Iran fiasco

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In Wiktionary, the online dictionary, there is an entry for “Trumpsplain” (infinitive verb, present tense). To Trumpsplain is “to explain or rationalise Donald Trump . . . his actions, remarks, policies or popularity.”

What an inelegant word. As an alternative, Wiktionary offers “sanewash”, which is scarcely better. Thankfully, we won’t be needing either for much longer.

I don't suggest that Trump is yesterday's man. He will command the world's premier armed forces until January 20 2029, whatever midterm voters do in November. He might even save the face he has lost in Iran with another war or two. But something has died of late, and it is the contrarian case for his presidency: the insistence that he has strategic gifts imperceptible to liberal snobs.

Iran has been too big a fiasco to square with that claim. He launched the war in a fit of exuberance after previous military wins and because (in [Marco Rubio's telling](#)) Israel was going to strike regardless. Since then, Trump has not been able to define, much less achieve, victory, which seems to range in his mind from Iran's "unconditional surrender" to the mere reopening of the Strait of Hormuz, otherwise known as the status quo ante. It is not even clear he understood the scale of the concessions to Iran that he signed in the memorandum of understanding in June. His latest gambit is economic pressure on the regime. This implies confrontation with China's Iran-enabling companies, just as Trump seeks to [smooth relations](#) with Xi Jinping.

The point is not just that his war has gone badly — even a well-planned one might have faltered — but that it contradicts his other objectives, such as avoiding foreign entanglements, and bears no hallmarks of detailed preparation. In other words, it was unstrategic. It was everything that Trumpsplainers always denied he was. Their one option now is to dismiss the war as an uncharacteristic lapse. More likely, Trump has been acting on impulse all these years, and pure luck saved him from disaster.

The heart of Trumpsplaining, the supposed rationale for all the president's strange actions, is China. Your classic 'splainer is an anti-Beijing hardliner who assumes that Trump shares their monomania. In fact, it is hard to think of a president who has blown more hot and cold on such an important bilateral relationship.

Consider the notion that Trump withholds support from Ukraine because China, not Russia, is the real threat. Even in theory, this makes little sense. (Let us confront China by enabling a Russia-friendly war outcome that it clearly desires?) Also, in practice, Trump does things that contradict his China-hawk reputation all the time. His great friend in Europe was the former Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán, who was Xi's man in that continent. When it comes to America's military posture — the distribution of forward bases and so on — there has scarcely been a pivot towards Asia under Trump.

In fact, Asian democracies, even those with which the US has mutual-defence treaties, are left in constant doubt about his commitment to them. Last week, Trump asked the Pentagon to cut short a series of military drills with South Korea. The reason for this snub, which will have emboldened China and the communist part of the peninsula? "My very good relationship with Kim Jong Un of North Korea". Thus spake the Metternich of South Ocean Boulevard.

There is no through-line here, no grand plan. Trump doesn't stint Ukraine in order to free up resources for the Indo-Pacific. He stints Ukraine because he feels like it. He acts out of personal chemistry, commercial self-interest, a few life-long beliefs and, yes, strategy. The last of these elements just tends to be overstated in the mix. (Though not by himself. The last person to go on about a Trump geostrategy is Trump, who is candid about his personal approach.)

So who is left of the Trumpsplainers? Who, even after Iran, squints to see order in the bedlam? There is Elbridge Colby, the Pentagon's policy chief, whose rationalisation of his boss's random doings is creative, as a man who is always spotting faces in clouds is creative. For example, what Asian democracies regard as on-off US support Colby describes as "flexible realism", which is the kind of think-tank jargon that could cover any conceivable policy at all. But he is staff. Staff have to abase themselves. The question is how people with no career at stake — Trumpsplainers are often in finance and tech — came to see Trump as someone of underrated strategic genius.

One answer is that liberal derision drove them to it. A generation ago, something similar happened regarding George W Bush. Because he wasn't, as the *bien pensants* alleged, an idiot, it was tempting to overdo the rebuttal and suggest that he was in fact uncommonly shrewd. Call it the escalation ladder. The truth, that despite a good enough brain he was still out of his depth, got lost in the partisan crossfire.

The other answer is emotional self-protection. This is an unsettling world, and it is easier to bear if the most powerful individual of all is thought to be working to some grand geopolitical scheme. The alternative prospect, that he is an erratic and humiliated 80-year-old who has more than half a term in which to avenge himself, seems rather nearer the truth. And how often does the truth keep people warm?

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