

Middle Eastern Wars and the US alliance

Secretary of State for Defence, General Mattis, has resigned over a dispute with the President. The President wishes to keep his campaign promises to pull US troops out of Syria and Afghanistan. The General thinks the US should stay in these countries to be close to its allies.

It is true that the world's leading power will have more influence and be more likely to succeed if it builds and maintains alliances. The US can depend on NATO, whilst understandably objecting that many NATO members fail to meet the minimum financial contribution which the US and the UK manage. The US will also have more influence in the Middle Eastern war torn region if it maintains local alliances and keeps troops there. This does not mean, however, that the President was wrong to campaign to reduce US military commitment to the Middle East, nor does it prove he is wrong to insist on keeping his word.

When the President asks his staff what US military intervention in Syria has achieved so far, there is no easy answer. The US and her allies did not want the Assad regime to continue, but had to assist the Assad regime in getting rid of ISIS, seen as an even bigger threat. Vacillation by the West over who the true enemy was – Assad or Isis – led to indecision and to growing Russian influence, based on strong backing for Assad. The roots of President Trump's wish to exit can be found in the unwillingness of the Obama regime to commit fully to helping Assad against Isis, or the failure of President Obama to come up with another strategy to rid Syria of both, which would have required huge force from the US and her allies to have any chance of success.

When the President asks what good can current low levels of troops do in modern Syria, where Assad is close to controlling the country again and where Russia is well dug in as a substantial external influence, there again is no great answer. If the USA and her allies are not prepared to commit many more forces, and if they have no clear alternative to the Assad tyranny backed by Russia, there is not a lot of point in staying.

In Afghanistan things are a bit different. The USA and her allies does have a government to co-operate with, and the western coalition in the past has spent much blood and treasure on resisting extremists in that country. There, too, however, defenders of western involvement have to answer how much longer do we have to stay? How much more training do the Afghan security and defence forces need? Are we happy with the political results of the long war?

On both sides of the Atlantic there is war weariness over the Middle East, and some disappointment with the results of substantial past intervention. The military have done a brave and good job in difficult circumstances, but the politicians have found it difficult to translate that into successful political action to form war free states following democratic principles.