

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 Trumps 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.

The European fall in car sales

Some in government wrongly worry that Brexit could damage our car industry. Latest sales figures show there is plenty of damage being done by EU regulations, UK taxes and a credit squeeze before we leave. Why doesn't any of this worry them? Why don't they do something to stop it?

Managed migration

Yesterday the government published its draft Immigration and Social Security Bill.

There were some good bits to it. The intention is to treat the rest of the world fairly and equally, with no special treatment for EU citizens. The aim is to encourage tourism and visitors. There will be no visas required for EU tourists coming here, and all tourists can stay for up to six months without the need for additional paperwork. Anyone gaining a place at a UK HE institution will be eligible for a permit. All those graduating from a UK university can stay for an additional six months to look for a job or to enjoy their time with us. These are important principles to assist our HE sector and tourist industry and show that the new global UK is outward looking and engaged with the wider world. Citizens of Australia, New Zealand, Japan, South Korea, the USA and Canada will be able to use the e-gates and faster entry system at our airports as EU people can today.

The proposals also include lifting the current quantitative controls on visas for people coming to undertake higher paid and skilled jobs in the UK currently applying to non EU citizens. The government argues that the UK is good at generating jobs and business activities and needs to be able to attract talent from all round the world to take up these opportunities. The provisional proposal is that such jobs would need to pay more than £30,000 a year to be free of controls.

The government is also suggesting a transitional system of allowing people to come in to work for up to a year at lower pay levels. They would not be eligible for benefits and would have to return home at the end of the year. The longer term aim is to stop inward migration to take low paid jobs, to seek to drive up productivity and pay and to give UK based individuals more chance of getting employment. Having access to fewer people from abroad willing to accept low pay should increase investment in machine power to do some of the tasks, and to make the remaining workforce more productive.

The Common Travel area with the Republic of Ireland is maintained, as before we joined the EEC/EU.

We read that the Chancellor and the Business Secretary are unhappy about any policy which reduces the flow of migrants from the EU into low paid employment. The Home Secretary himself seems unhappy about continuing the policy aim of reducing inward migration substantially in line with the Prime Minister's often stated wish and with the Conservative Manifesto.

Wokingham Choral Society

I had the pleasure of attending the Choral Society's carol concert on Saturday at All Saints Church. The choir was in great voice, with the audience singing along to some of the better known ones. I would like to say a big Thank you to the choir for all the work they put in to entertaining us so well throughout the year, and wish them every success for 2019.

Deals galore in place of the Withdrawal Agreement

No deal has always been a misnomer of leaving the EU without signing the Withdrawal Agreement. Proponents have called it leaving on WTO terms, or a Clean break exit with global trading or some such. More recently others have called it a managed exit, drawing attention to the various areas of collaboration and agreement there will be on a so called No Deal exit.

So let me have another go at explaining the WTO option. It is if you like the "multi deal option" or deals on wheels, as the UK and the EU agree a series of measures to smooth transport and trade across the Channel and across the Irish border.

We now know there will be the following Agreements

The Common Transit Convention

The facilitation of trade Convention

WTO trading rules

Air Services Agreement

Continued arrangements for London based derivatives to trade and settle

Phyto-sanitary arrangements

Possible continuing membership of the Government Procurement Agreement

In other words a WTO Brexit will also include a number of important agreements to ensure the planes will fly, the trucks will move and the trade will flow after March 29

There will be the added bonus that we can stop all these groundhog day debates and show how absurd so many of these scare stories are.