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TRUMP—FOREIGN.

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Heds.

“Who’s Deciding Trump’s Foreign Policy? Not Trump.”

Or

“76 Days in Office, Trump’s Big Foreign Policy Ideas Are Toast.”

Donald Trump's unorthodox foreign policy ideas caused one stir after another before he assumed the presidency. Now that he's in the White House, Trump doesn't seem to have many ideas—and those he has aren't surviving long once he puts them on the table.

On Wednesday Trump **removed Stephen Bannon**

https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/bannon-removed-from-security-council-as-mcmaster-asserts-control/2017/04/05/ffa8b5d2-1a3a-11e7-bcc2-7d1a0973e7b2_story.html?utm_term=.b861c111ebf4 , his chief strategist and architect of Trump's "America First" policy, from his seat on the National Security Council. It's the clearest sign yet that this administration's foreign policy isn't likely to disturb much of what it inherited.

Trump's caught in the middle. He continues to be sharply—and rightly—critical of the Obama administration's foreign policies. But on one policy question after another he's coming around to accepting what he was handed.

When he reverses the direction Obama set, it's because he's deferring to the Pentagon in cases the previous administration resisted its advice. You

start to wonder what Trump’s White House is doing on the foreign policy side apart from taking orders—if not from Defense, then from State.

A week ago, administration officials said that ousting Syrian President Bashar al–Assad was **no longer the U.S. priority**

<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-usa-haley-idUSKBN1712QL> . After Obama and then-Secretary of State Kerry

argued this point for months with the Pentagon and the CIA, the Trump White House simply **labeled the idea of removing Assad “silly**

<http://www.nationalreview.com/article/446482/trump-syria-bashar-assad-isis-fight-trump> .”

Now it isn’t silly. In response to **the chemical weapons attack**

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/04/world/middleeast/syria-gas-attack.html> in a rebel-held zone of northern Syria Tuesday, ousting

Assad may now return as Washington’s policy priority. When UN Ambassador Nikki Haley told the Security Council Tuesday that the

U.S. **“may take our own action**

<https://mobile.nytimes.com/2017/04/05/world/middleeast/syria-chemical-attack-un.html> ,” that seems to be what she meant.

A vigorous response to the attack is imperative, as all agree. Who's going to decide what it is, with input from whom, and with what strategic goal? These are the questions, and there aren't any answers—not a reassuring state of affairs 76 days into the Trump presidency.

Syria's now a test for Trump's foreign policy team. The White House has already given the Pentagon more autonomy in the Middle East's conflict zones. We'll know what that's going to look like as the administration decides whether Obama's "Assad must go" is back as a good summary of U.S. policy.

China's another test for Trump, and the exam started Thursday, when President Xi Jinping arrived for **a two-day summit at Mar-a-Lago** <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-china-summit-analysis-idUSKBN1752FT> . Secretary of State Tillerson smoothed the edges of Trump's rough start with Xi when he visited Beijing a month ago. But it's going to be an uncomfortable encounter: The two aren't a match—not on personality and not on policy.

"The meeting next week with China will be a very difficult one," **Trump** **Tweeted last week** <http://www.politico.com/story/2017/03/trump-china->

[xi-jinping-difficult-236733](#) . “We can no longer have massive trade deficits and job losses. American companies must be prepared to look at other alternatives.”

Trump has often had the wrong end of the stick with China, and he’s holding it again. One, China’s economy is expected to overtake the European Union’s by the end of this year. There are no alternatives for U.S. companies, which have somewhere between \$50 billion and \$80 billion (depending on which side is counting) **invested on the ground** <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/us-china-two-way-direct-investment-dollar.pdf> in China.

Two, strong domestic demand has been boosting China’s imports from the U.S. since the final quarter of 2015; exports to the U.S. have slowed, while **Chinese investment in the U.S.** <http://patricklawrence.us/china-buying-us-companies-anyone-care/> hits one record after another. If the trade and investment accounts are headed in the right direction, it’s worse than pointless to face off on them.

Trump’s other priority is to leverage economic ties to get Xi to put more pressure on North Korea. For a variety of reasons—political, diplomatic,

strategic, economic—this hold zero potential. The Obama administration spent eight years proving this.

Trump could've made his mark by improving on the pointlessly tense relationship Obama left him with, notably on the South China Sea issue. Instead, he's on track to make Obama's mistakes again and some of his own—worsening ties while getting little or nothing for it.

On NATO, Israel, Iran, and other questions, Trump's rhetoric has proven one thing, his policy framework another: This administration's more about continuity than change—and transformation is out of the question.

That's a very mixed blessing. Trump's verbal excesses will no longer threaten global stability and longstanding alliances. But the previous administration's messes and failures were many, and Trump's stands to miss a lot of opportunities to fix or at least improve on them.

Relations with Russia are an outstanding question. Trump's idea of a new "détente" with Moscow had supporters and critics in Washington; it could have opened the door to cooperation in areas of mutual interest.

But the tragedy in Syria this week is the latest of many signs that Trump's going to stay with the acrimonious relationship that took root during Obama years. Tillerson is to be in Moscow next week, and the Trump Administration will face another test.

ENDIT REGARDS PATRICK NORFOLK.