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WILL THE GOLAN HEIGHTS BE TRUMP'S HEIGHT?



Over the years of his presidency, Donald Trump has “accustomed” the international community and the global media to react excitedly to every provocative post he makes on his favourite social media platform, Twitter. It is more difficult to accustomate this audience to a radical revision of American foreign policy, especially when it comes to such a tricky region as the Middle East. His substantial change in the long-term related US agenda has caused, on the one hand, fears of new tensions, and on the other hand, criticism of the president for undermining the US’s positions with such initiatives and for strengthening the US’s opponents.

Trump declared his intension to recognise the sovereignty of Israel over the Golan Heights, which has both external and internal political dimensions. On April 9, Israel is going to hold parliamentary elections, and the decision of the US President is the most powerful PR move in support of the Netanyahu campaign. In order to preclude any suspicions that this statement may have been a capricious message from the eccentric president, rather than a conscious White House decision, it was made during the visit of US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to Israel. Echoing his superior’s point on the “extraordinary strategic importance of the Golan Heights”, Mike Pompeo said that Washington’s move is not an indication of US double standards regarding Crimea: “What the president did with the Golan Heights is recognise the reality on the ground and the security situation necessary for the protection of the Israeli state. It’s that – it’s that simple.” According to the American diplomat, this decision does not violate any resolutions made by the UN Security Council. On the contrary, “the decision the president made will increase the opportunity for there to be stability throughout the region”. Such an argument will hardly convince anyone, either within the US or in the international community. For instance, Germany, Great Britain, Russia, and the Arab world, each for its own reasons, still hold the position that the Golan Heights is Syrian territory, occupied by Israel.

Within the US, the main point of criticism from some of the Democrats is that this decision is political in nature, and that it was taken without any inter-party or political debate. Some blame Trump, opining that he prefers the interests of Netanyahu over the interests of America. Others are afraid that the decision “will overthrow the status quo that was held for many years” and will cause a new wave of confrontation of Israel with Iran and Hezbollah. Still others indicate that the recognition of the Golan Heights as part of Israel effectively buries Trump’s “deal of the century” between Israelis and Palestinians, which the White House had planned to announce within several weeks.

For Trump himself, this decision does not imply any risk: Israel’s enemies will not change their attitude towards the Jewish state regardless of Washington’s perception of the formal status of the Golan Heights. The Arab Street will calm down after a brief boiling over. Arab leaders will tolerate this decision, just as they tolerated the US’s recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel in December 2017. Europeans will not go beyond words in finding fault with this crisis in “Atlantic solidarity”.

In Helsinki, President Vladimir Putin actually proposed to make the Golan a “deconflict zone” between Israel and Syria (and Iran), sponsored by the US and Russia, but it seems that neither Tel-Aviv nor Washington believe that it will work. As a result, with respect to the foreign policy sphere, the importance of this issue for the 45th US President will ebb following the re-election of Netanyahu and the physical strengthening of Israel’s security “on the ground”. On the domestic front, proper positioning of this topic is significant for Trump with regard to his own re-election in 2020.

The various coalitions in the Democratic Party are indeed unanimous in their rejection of Trump’s decision, but in recent months, the party itself indicated that it is seriously split over the Israel issue. Some of the Democrats who were elected to Congress in November 2018 (the “progressive wing”), promote an extremely critical position regarding the Jewish state and US support of Israel. A number of their senior party colleagues from the ‘left wing’ and American Jewish liberals support their position. Such trends are gradually eroding the traditional interparty consensus of American politics toward Israel-related issues.

The situation becomes even more heated due to the fact that Trump’s initiative on the Golan Heights coincided with Netanyahu’s visit to the US. On March 25, the Israeli Prime Minister will be received at the White House, and on the 26th, he will deliver a speech at the conference of the American Israel Public Relations Committee (AIPAC), the largest conservative organisation lobbying for pro-Israel policy in the US.

The Republicans are taking a chance, claiming they are a bastion of American-Israeli friendship, and that they are in a hurry to declare Trump’s initiative on the Golan Heights as the official policy of Washington. In order to block the Republicans from dominating the US relationship with Jerusalem, the Democratic leadership delegated senior members of the party to the AIPAC conference: Speaker of the US House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi as well as Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer. “Chuck and Nancy” have already created serious problems for the US President this year, taking a strong position on the government’s “shutdown” and the financing of the wall on the border with Mexico. This crisis has cost Trump a downgrade in his rating (although following the crisis, he gained back 7% immediately). Given the composition of the participants of the AIPAC conference, which was attended by Trump’s powerful delegation, headed by Vice President Pence – the Republican president intends to win the next round of the



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confrontation with the Democrats with maximum internal and foreign policy dividends.

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