



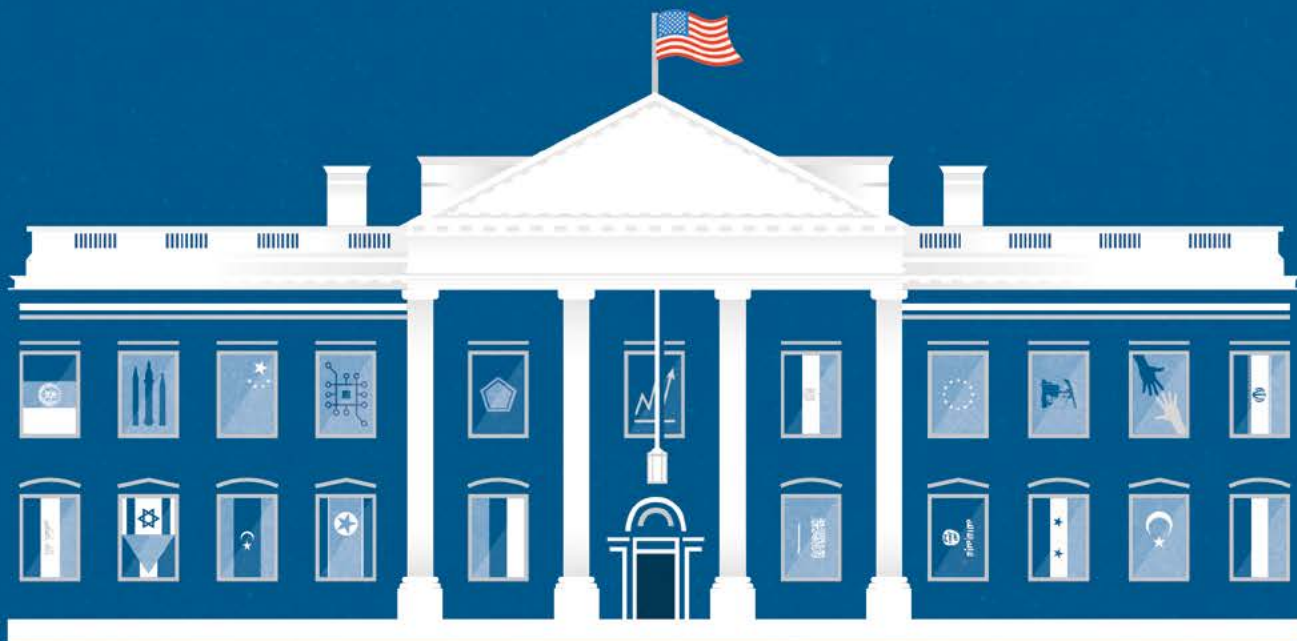
Midterm Assessment

The Trump Administration's Foreign and National Security Policies

Foreword by Lt. Gen. (Ret.) H.R. McMaster

Edited by John Hannah & David Adesnik

January 2019



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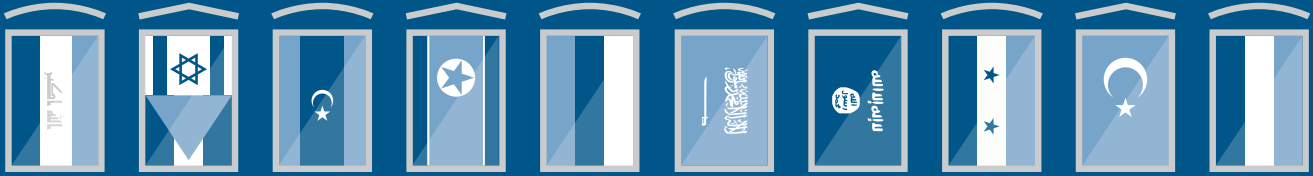
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FOREWORD

Lt. Gen. (Ret.) H.R. McMaster



CMPP Chairman

McMaster was the 26th assistant to the president for National Security Affairs. He served as a commissioned officer in the United States Army for 34 years before retiring as a Lieutenant General in June 2018.

I**N THIS MIDTERM ASSESSMENT**, FDD experts and scholars evaluate the Trump administration's efforts to advance and protect U.S. vital interests. The assessment spans the broad range of threats and challenges to national security and prosperity that our nation faces. Those threats and challenges include revisionist powers, hostile states, and transnational terrorist organizations. And the essays also consider new domains in which these threats operate (such as cyberspace) as well as increasing dangers associated with the potential breakdown of the nuclear nonproliferation regime and the prospect of hostile states and non-state actors gaining access to some of the most destructive weapons on earth. This assessment deserves wide attention because the stakes are high. And it deserves attention because the authors have transcended the vitriolic and shallow partisan discourse that dominates much of what passes for commentary on foreign policy and national security.

The 2017 U.S. National Security Strategy emphasized the need to compete more effectively to protect our free and open societies from those who are promoting authoritarian and closed systems. Nations committed to democratic governance and free market economies must demonstrate a much higher degree of strategic competence, especially in cooperative efforts to improve security and grow prosperity. And overcoming challenges to national and international security will require confidence – confidence in democratic principles, institutions, and processes as well as confidence in our free market economies.

At a time when those who know the least about issues seem to be those who hold the most strident opinions, FDD's work as represented in this assessment is essential to generating the bipartisan understanding necessary to compete effectively and preserve America's strategic advantages.



INTRODUCTION

John Hannah

Trying to make a fair assessment of President Donald Trump’s foreign policy halfway through his term is fraught with challenges – not least the extreme polarization afflicting the Trump era. For the president’s opponents, there is little merit in anything that he has done. For his supporters, he can do almost no wrong. An honest effort to weigh pros and cons, to account for both the successes and the shortcomings, seems guaranteed to antagonize nearly everyone, save for the shrinking minority that still clings to the political center and puts a premium on old-fashioned – but critical – notions of bipartisanship.

A second difficulty for anyone taking stock of Trump’s foreign policy is the president’s own unpredictability. Nothing ever seems settled – even when it seems settled. Trump’s Syria policy is the starkest example to date. In March 2018, Trump took his national security team by surprise when he announced at a political rally that he would be bringing U.S. troops back from Syria “very soon.” After being advised that the Islamic State still posed a significant threat, Trump relented. Senior U.S. officials then spent several months reassuring audiences that the president had decided to remain in Syria until the Islamic State had suffered an enduring defeat, all Iranian-commanded troops had left the country, and an irreversible political process was underway. But within the span of a few days in December 2018, Trump yet again upended the policy, deciding to withdraw all U.S. troops on the spur of the moment during a phone call with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

No prior discussion with his top foreign policy and military advisers. No notice to Congress. No consultation with allies – even those fighting alongside their American counterparts. And no advance planning on how a

withdrawal might be executed to minimize risks. One day U.S. troops were staying and the next day they were leaving.

Needless to say, when American national security strategy becomes prone to overnight reversal based on little more than the unilateral whims of an erratic president, any attempt to assess that strategy becomes particularly difficult. A strategy to secure U.S. interests in Syria against Russia, Iran, and the Islamic State that appeared challenging but sound to many analysts on December 18 was suddenly upended by an impulsive tweet on December 19, yielding an irresponsible, dangerous, and chaotic mess.

Worryingly, what is true for Syria today could apply to other issues tomorrow. Within days of his withdrawal announcement from Syria, Trump also ordered that U.S. troops in Afghanistan be cut in half – catching not only America’s Afghan allies by surprise, but also U.S. negotiators who were struggling to initiate peace talks with the Taliban. Who can predict with any confidence from one week or month to the next that Trump will not suddenly and radically alter the U.S. force presence in Iraq, South Korea, or Japan? He has certainly complained about all these deployments in the past, questioning their cost, their value to America, and why the U.S. was doing what local partners should be doing for themselves. For that matter, he has also done this repeatedly with respect to the U.S. role in NATO.

All this suggests that the half-life of any particular Trump policy could be decidedly short. Indeed, in just the few weeks since his Syria announcement, the president and his advisers issued a flurry of statements indicating that the withdrawal might actually end up being more deliberate and conditioned than Trump’s initial tweets suggested. Trying to produce an edited volume that gives





readers an up-to-date rendering of the administration’s efforts across a wide range of issues certainly runs the risk that at least some of the assessments could be overtaken by events – or, more accurately, tweets – in the week or two between the time when authors complete their final revisions and publication occurs. With Trump, the standard warning label seems more apt than usual: While these essays have sought to provide an accurate snapshot of the administration’s policies at the time of writing, the authors are not responsible for any sudden disruptions that the president’s social media account may subsequently beget.

Despite the unique occupational hazards of policy analysis in the age of Trump, the Foundation for Defense of Democracies nevertheless felt there was real utility in this effort to collect in one place the considered judgments of our experts on Trump’s policies at midterm. The flood of events since the president entered office, not to mention the heat of the rhetoric, have often done more to obscure than illuminate reality. It is hard enough at times to recall and make sense of what happened last week, much less last month or last year.

The essays that follow seek to fill that gap by providing concise, dispassionate overviews of what the administration’s policies have actually been over the past two years on a wide array of topics that are central to American national security. Especially as a new Congress takes up its responsibilities, and the global challenges confronting the United States show no signs of abating, the expertise and research brought to bear in this volume offer a starting point for anyone seeking to get up to speed quickly on where U.S. foreign policy stands at the beginning of 2019, as well as to consider the necessary next steps to secure U.S. interests.

To make the collection as user-friendly as possible, each essay is of similar length and follows an identical three-part structure in addressing its topic: 1) a review of the administration’s policy to date; 2) an assessment of the policy’s achievements and shortcomings; and 3) a set of recommendations to strengthen the policy over the next two years.

While by no means a comprehensive treatment of every key area of U.S. foreign policy – climate change, sub-Saharan Africa, and Venezuela are absent, for example – the breadth and depth of knowledge on display is a testament to the extraordinary range of expertise that FDD’s researchers possess and the breadth of issues in which we are engaged as an organization. Along those lines, it is worth mentioning that, consistent with FDD’s internal ethos of welcoming spirited debate among its experts, the views expressed reflect the professional judgments of each essay’s author(s), and are not intended to constitute any “official” institutional position.

By definition, midterm assessments consist of works in progress. Trump’s foreign policy is very much that. This volume seeks to move beyond the polarized caricatures to capture the complexities of the past two years – the good, the bad, and the ugly. Nuance and balance may be increasingly out of vogue, but those remain the standards that these essays strive to meet – and the ground where Americans from both sides of the aisle are still most likely to engage in productive debate about the future of their country and its role in a rapidly changing, still dangerous world. ■





IRAN

Mark Dubowitz



ABOVE: An Iranian surface-to-surface Ghasedak missile is driven past portraits of Iran's late founder of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, during the annual army day military parade on April 17, 2008 in Tehran, Iran. (Photo by Majid/Getty Images)

RIGHT: Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and Basij fighters. (Wikimedia Commons)

CURRENT POLICY | IRAN

For almost two years, before President Trump ordered the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Syria in December 2018, the Trump administration pursued an Iran policy based on the use of all instruments of national power to stop Tehran from engaging in a wide array of aggressive and malign behaviors that defy global norms. In his May 21, 2018 speech, “A New Iran Strategy,” Secretary of State Mike Pompeo called on Iran to end verifiably its nuclear weapons and advanced ballistic missile programs, cease its support for terrorism and the destabilization of foreign governments, release all hostages, and halt its aggression against Israel and other U.S. allies.¹

To achieve these objectives, the administration designed a strategy to pressure the regime – diplomatically, economically, and militarily. To that end, the administration walked away from the nuclear deal known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and reinstated the comprehensive sanctions that had forced Iran to the negotiating table in 2013. The focal point of U.S. strategy was to intensify the Iranian regime’s ongoing liquidity crisis, which threatened to cripple its economy as a whole. The secretary of state also insisted the U.S. “will advocate tirelessly for the Iranian people,” who endure grave human rights violations and pervasive corruption. The Trump administration made it clear that it did not seek regime change, but would take advantage of the Islamic Republic’s deficit of legitimacy. In short, the U.S. purported to implement a policy of maximum pressure.

The administration designed its comprehensive pressure campaign to resemble the one Ronald Reagan deployed against the Soviet Union. The cornerstone of his strategy was the recognition that the Soviet Union was an aggressive and revolutionary, yet internally fragile, regime. Reagan outlined his policy in National Security Decision Directive 75 in 1983. The plan included a massive defense buildup, economic warfare, support for anti-Soviet proxy forces and dissidents to combat Moscow globally, and an all-out offensive against the regime’s ideological legitimacy.

The Trump administration withdrew from the JCPOA because the nuclear deal permitted Iran to reach the threshold of a nuclear weapons capability without even cheating. Rather, by waiting for key constraints to sunset, Tehran would have an industrial-size enrichment program, a near-zero breakout time, advanced centrifuges that are easier to operate in a clandestine manner, long-range ballistic missiles, and access to advanced conventional weaponry. In the meantime, its economy could grow with increased foreign investment and decreased vulnerability to sanctions.

The administration made it clear that it was prepared to reestablish full diplomatic and commercial relations with Tehran if the regime negotiated a deal that corrects the shortcomings of the JCPOA. As Secretary Pompeo indicated, this would include an end to all uranium enrichment and plutonium reprocessing, “unqualified access” to all sites for UN weapons inspectors, full disclosure of previous nuclear weapons programs, and the termination of Iran’s nuclear-capable missile program. An agreement would also require the release of all U.S. and foreign hostages and the cessation of Iran’s support for terrorism and other aggressive conduct in the Middle East.

The Trump administration’s strategy came down to putting the regime in Tehran to a stark choice between a fundamental change in its behavior and an unrelenting pressure campaign to severely weaken the Islamic Republic. However, Trump’s decision to pull U.S. troops from Syria raises serious doubts about the president’s commitment to pressuring Iran on every front. ■



ASSESSMENT | IRAN

Tehran is reeling from the combination of sanctions pressure and the popular discontent aggravated by the regime's own repression and mismanagement. Yet the impending U.S. withdrawal from Syria diminishes the pressure on Tehran at a critical moment.

The most successful part of Trump's Iran strategy has been the reinstatement of comprehensive sanctions suspended as part of the nuclear deal. While European governments declined to re-impose sanctions, scores of foreign investors, including major multinational corporations, are abandoning the Iranian market.² The IMF and World Bank now forecast a deepening recession. The value of the Iranian rial is plummeting while inflation skyrockets. Sanctions have cut back oil exports by about 30 percent, costing the regime billions at a time when it is desperate for hard currency. The U.S. has also renewed its challenge to the clerical regime's legitimacy by resuming the effort to sanction corrupt officials and human rights violators.

While European governments declined to re-impose sanctions, scores of foreign investors, including major multinational corporations, are abandoning the Iranian market.

Economic pressure is rising despite the efforts of European governments to salvage the JCPOA by preserving its economic incentives for Tehran. European efforts include setting up special purpose vehicles for international payments, resisting the expulsion of Iran from the SWIFT financial messaging system, and deterring compliance with U.S. sanctions by activating a blocking statue.

In contrast to the effectiveness of sanctions, the administration's regional strategy to counter Iranian influence in the Middle East is on life support thanks to the planned withdrawal of U.S. troops from Syria.

Trump's principal advisers recognized that the presence of U.S. forces in Syria denied key terrain and natural resources to Iran, Hezbollah, Russia, and Bashar

al-Assad's regime, while costing the United States relatively little and while our forces incurred very few casualties. Iran, in particular, will appreciate Trump's removal of the most important obstacle to its completion of a "land bridge," or ground corridor, from Western Iran to the Mediterranean. The U.S. military presence in Syria also deterred Turkish aggression against the Syrian Kurds, who lost thousands of fighters whom had joined the U.S.-led campaign against the Islamic State. For good reason, U.S. adversaries are cheering the withdrawal from Syria while friends and allies question our wisdom and reliability.

The collapse of the U.S. effort to push back against Iran's regional aggression means that U.S. policy now depends almost entirely on sanctions. However, sanctions alone are not a strategy. In isolation, they serve the same purpose the nuclear deal did for Barack Obama: to cover America's retreat from the region.

The Trump administration's Iran policy now suffers from a lack of bipartisan support. Only a broad and deep bipartisan consensus in Congress made possible the tough sanctions laws that forced Iran into nuclear negotiations in 2013. Regrettably, the Obama administration pressed forward with the JCPOA despite majority opposition in Congress. This polarization persists. If Democrats retake the White House in 2020, the new president is likely to re-enter the JCPOA and suspend sanctions once again, though he or she will face the prospect of key restrictions on Iran's nuclear, missile, and military programs lapsing during their first and second terms.

Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei appears to recognize this dynamic and may decide to play for time, counting on Trump's defeat in 2020. Khamenei likely understands that Trump's decision on Syria signals a lack of staying power, fickleness, and fatigue. It also signals contempt for U.S. allies. Thus, Tehran may now welcome a diplomatic process whose purpose is to waste time and blunt the sanctions campaign. For that reason, Trump's expressions of interest in meeting Hassan Rouhani play right into Tehran's hands. In this regard, the negotiations with North Korea are a cautionary tale. ■

RECOMMENDATIONS | IRAN

- 1 Ensure the SWIFT financial messaging service immediately disconnects any Iranian banks engaged in illicit transactions.** Iranian banks have a record of abusing SWIFT's humanitarian channel to evade sanctions. The U.S. should push for the immediate disconnection of Iranian banks and the sanctioning of any non-Iranian bank or company that helps an Iranian bank engage in such misconduct.
- 2 Persuade the European Central Bank to stop clearing euro-based Iranian transactions through its Target2 settlement system.** Target2 explicitly forbids transactions involving money laundering, terror finance, and nuclear proliferation.
- 3 Issue a permanent USA PATRIOT Act Section 311 determination that Iran is a "jurisdiction of primary money laundering concern."** The determination should require enhanced auditing and due diligence for any company doing business with Iran. It should strengthen "Know Your Customer's Customer" (KYCC) rules for Iran-related transactions, and undo late 2016 revisions to Treasury's guidelines on the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), U.S. dollar, and KYCC.
- 4 Sanction Iran's major sources of funding.** The United States should sanction companies over which the IRGC and other malign actors exert substantial control but not a majority share. It should also target market segments under IRGC influence, such as mining, metallurgy, construction, telecommunications, and computer science. Similarly, Washington should expand sanctions beyond the supreme leader's \$200-billion corporate conglomerate to target charitable trusts, or *bonyads*, including the Mostazafan Foundation and Astan Quds Razavi. Likewise, sanction the National Development Fund, a sovereign wealth fund. Finally, the State Department should designate the IRGC as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO).
- 5 Constantly challenge the legitimacy of the clerical regime by emphasizing its corruption and human rights violations.** Trump should issue a new Iran-related executive order that broadens the categories of individuals subject to sanctions for corruption and human rights violations. The administration should also encourage condemnations and sanctions by foreign leaders. It should also announce a new "Iran Kleptocracy Initiative" to expose corrupt officials' hidden assets.
- 6 Help the Iranian people evade censorship and access credible information.** The administration should foster the development of tools for Iranian citizens' safe online communication, and consider the provision of internet access via satellite. It should direct federal agencies responsible for foreign broadcasting to highlight corruption and human rights violations. It should support organizations that assist and train pro-democracy activists and dissidents.
- 7 Work to restore the U.S.-European partnership that helped restrain Iran prior to the JCPOA.** The administration should build on concerns that Europe shares about Iranian missiles, human rights violations, and regional instability, which increases refugee flows.
- 8 Lift the blanket U.S. travel ban on Iranian citizens, but expel those linked to the regime.** The U.S. should welcome ordinary Iranians, while denying their oppressors the privilege of visiting or studying in the U.S.
- 9 Expand efforts to block the U.S.-designated Mahan Air's flights to Europe and the Gulf.** Use secondary sanctions to target Mahan's ticketing agents and ground services operators as well as banks facilitating the airline's payments for airport services.
- 10 Attach secondary "travel-related" sanctions to travel bans issued on Iranian officials and related proxies.**
- 11 Ensure the U.S. has a credible military option to reinforce its economic and financial pressure campaign.** This must include a military plan to prevent Iran from producing a nuclear bomb and a credible U.S.-supported military strategy to counter Iranian influence in the region. The U.S. should provide allies like Israel all the needed support to resist Iranian aggression.
- 12 Suspend the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Syria.** Even if most troops are withdrawn, maintain a contingent of Special Operations Forces at the al-Tanf in eastern Syria, which sits astride the optimal route for Iran's land bridge to the Mediterranean.



EUROPE

Benjamin Weinthal and David Adesnik



ABOVE: German Chancellor Angela Merkel deliberates with U.S. President Donald Trump on the sidelines of the second day of the G7 summit on June 9, 2018 in Charlevoix, Canada. (Photo by Jesco Denzel/Bundesregierung via Getty Images)

RIGHT: World leaders meet for NATO summit in Brussels. (Photo by Jasper Juinen/Getty Images)

CURRENT POLICY | EUROPE

The Trump administration has withdrawn unapologetically from two multilateral agreements – the Paris Climate Accord and the nuclear deal with Iran – that Europe's most influential leaders consider both vital to their interests and milestones of progress toward a more cooperative world order. The White House has also clashed continuously with its European counterparts over trade policy and the sufficiency of their contributions to NATO.

These substantive disagreements have become especially acrimonious because Donald Trump has personally criticized his European counterparts in a manner once unthinkable for an American president. Trump has also created new challenges for the transatlantic alliance by raising doubts about his support for NATO's core commitment of collective defense, describing NATO member states as freeloaders and neglecting the shared values that bind the alliance together.

Trump pledged as a candidate to withdraw the U.S. from the Paris Accord, and followed through on that promise in June 2017. French President Emmanuel Macron expressed visceral frustration with the American exit. In his address to the UN General Assembly in September 2018, Macron declared, "Let's sign no more trade agreements with powers that don't respect the Paris Agreement."³

Even though Trump consistently denounced the nuclear deal with Iran as "the worst deal ever," the State Department spent several months negotiating a set of potential amendments with the British, French, and Germans. These discussions sought to fix the deal's biggest flaws, including inadequate verification measures, the failure to address Iran's expanding ballistic missile program, and sunset clauses on key nuclear restrictions that expired too soon.

In May 2018, after it became clear that no transatlantic consensus

would emerge on how to fix the deal, Trump pulled the U.S. out of the agreement formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). The U.S. Treasury then announced the reinstatement of all U.S. sanctions on Iran after a 180-day waiting period. In response, European leaders began to explore potential means for circumventing U.S. sanctions. These included "blocking legislation" to prevent corporations from complying with sanctions and a "special purpose vehicle" (SPV) to enable financial transactions with Tehran.

With regard to NATO, Trump has questioned whether the alliance is worth preserving and accused the other members of being delinquent, or even "captive to Russia," in the case of Germany.⁴ Though he eventually endorsed the alliance's core Article V commitment to collective defense, Trump pointedly refused to do so during his first visit to NATO headquarters in May 2017. With tensions rising, the French president called in November 2018 for the creation of a "true European army" to protect Europe, a proposal that German Chancellor Angela Merkel quickly seconded.⁵

On the trade front, Trump put in place steel and aluminum tariffs that apply to European imports, while the EU retaliated with import duties on U.S. goods, including motorcycles, bourbon, and blue jeans. Tensions subsided after Trump and EU Commission chief Jean-Claude Juncker reached an agreement in principle "to work together toward zero tariffs, zero non-tariff barriers, and zero subsidies on non-auto industrial goods."⁶ The steel and aluminum tariffs remain in place, however. ■



ASSESSMENT | EUROPE

The Trump administration has created unprecedented tension between the U.S. and Europe. While the administration should not reverse its position on critical issues simply because Europe disagrees, the president should articulate criticism with greater nuance and appreciation for the overall importance of the transatlantic alliance to U.S. security, prosperity, and values. By standing together, the U.S. and Europe can far more effectively address the growing challenge that they both face from China.

By standing together, the U.S. and Europe can far more effectively address the growing challenge that they both face from China.

The Trump administration correctly sought to fix the nuclear deal, together with Europe, before jettisoning it. Yet the Europeans remain adamantly unwilling to take punitive actions against Iran for ballistic missile launches and related offenses, lest they jeopardize the nuclear deal. Also, since 2015, the EU has not sanctioned any additional Iranian officials for their grave human rights violations, whereas the Trump administration has designated 19 individuals and entities for their abuses. Only after Iran assassinated or attempted to assassinate opposition figures in France, Denmark, and the Netherlands did the EU impose new terrorism sanctions in January 2019.

After its withdrawal from the JCPOA, the Trump administration dealt effectively with European efforts to circumvent U.S. sanctions. European diplomats aggressively lobbied their American counterparts to keep Iran's banks connected to the SWIFT international messaging system, since they know that as long as Iran is on SWIFT, there is a financial conduit available for conducting trade in spite of U.S. sanctions. In response to U.S. pressure, SWIFT disconnected the Central Bank of Iran and other leading financial institutions, although some remain connected for the purpose of facilitating humanitarian transactions.

Meanwhile, EU blocking legislation and related measures did not prevent the divestment of Europe's leading multinational firms from Iran's volatile market, including the German engineering powerhouse Siemens, French energy company Total, and massive Danish shipping enterprise Maersk.⁷ Executives know that the risks of being cut off from the American market and the U.S. dollar far outweigh the benefits of operating in Iran. Meanwhile, the prospects for an SPV remain uncertain. The EU claims that preparations for introducing the mechanism will continue into 2019.

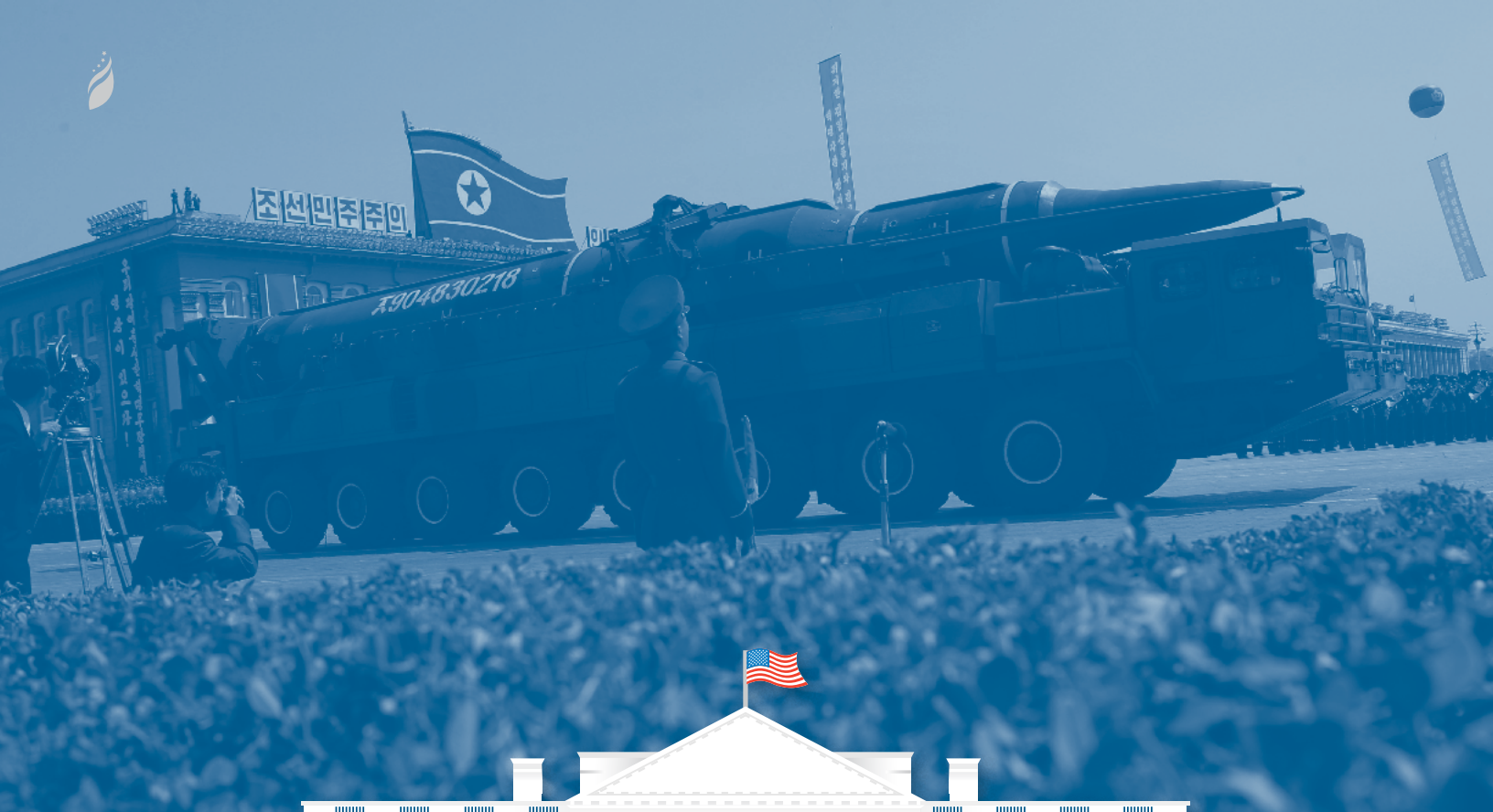
Turning to NATO, four additional allies are now on track to spend 2 percent or more of GDP on defense, the binding target set by the alliance in 2014. This brings the total to eight, including the United States, which far outpaces the rest by spending more than 3 percent of GDP. Overall, America's NATO partners have spent an additional \$41 billion on defense over the past two years.⁸ That said, it is mostly the smaller NATO members on the Russian periphery that have moved toward the 2 percent target. The 27 non-U.S. member states still spend an average of 1.47 percent of GDP, up from 1.40 in 2014.

Operationally, despite Trump's persistent criticism of the alliance, the U.S. continues to devote additional resources to enhance NATO's overall capabilities to constrain and deter Russian aggression, particularly on its eastern flank. U.S. funding for the European Deterrence Initiative rose 40 percent to \$4.8 billion in 2018, and the administration has requested \$6.5 billion for 2019.

Finally, on trade, the EU apparently put the ill-defined Trump-Juncker deal on a slow track, perhaps waiting for a more pro-trade candidate to win the 2020 U.S. elections. Given the far greater importance of overhauling U.S. economic relations with China, the Trump administration should focus on that goal rather than pursuing disputes with European trade partners. Whereas the U.S. and Europe pursue economic competition within the framework of a rules-based global trading system, both must now contend with China's efforts to reap the benefits of an open trading system while violating its norms. ■

RECOMMENDATIONS | EUROPE

- 1 Ensure the long-term viability of NATO by emphasizing its foundation of shared values.** While the administration often insists that “America First” does not mean America alone, the president’s view of alliances appears to be mainly transactional, rather than values-based. At a minimum, the president should affirm unequivocally the U.S. commitment to NATO, and especially its obligation to collective defense under Article V. On the European side, the test of its commitment will be whether the larger states of Western Europe make clear progress toward the 2 percent spending target.
- 2 Exercise careful oversight of the SWIFT humanitarian channel and continue blocking the establishment of an SPV.** After SWIFT disconnected Iran’s leading banks in 2012, Iran abused the remaining humanitarian channel to restock the regime’s reserves of hard currency. The U.S. should insist that SWIFT immediately disconnect any bank that engages in such illicit conduct. Nor should the White House waver in its insistence that any institution participating in an SPV would be subject to sanctions.
- 3 Employ sanctions and diplomacy to disrupt Hezbollah’s operations in Europe.** Despite disagreements about the nuclear deal, the U.S. and Europe have a mutual interest in bringing greater pressure to bear on Iran’s most potent terrorist proxy. The U.S. should press all European countries to designate Hezbollah in its entirety as a terrorist organization, rather than allowing its so-called political wing to operate legally. The U.S. should also employ new sanctions authorities signed into law in the fall of 2018 to designate European entities and individuals that transact with Hezbollah.
- 4 Look for opportunities to partner with European states to address other common threats.** In April 2018, French and British jets joined the U.S. in launching air strikes in Syria to punish Bashar al-Assad’s use of chemical weapons. Likewise, the French and British have troops in northeast Syria, with whom the U.S. should continue working to prevent the regrowth of the Islamic State and protect local partners like the Kurds, even if the overall U.S. presence diminishes. Similarly, Europe shares many of the Trump administration’s concerns over unfair Chinese trade policies, intellectual property theft, and threats to cybersecurity.
- 5 Resolve trade disputes amicably while moving toward the zero tariff, zero barrier, and zero subsidy goal envisioned by Trump and Juncker.** The U.S. should assert its interests firmly in trade negotiations while remembering that Europe is a genuine economic partner, unlike China who manipulates commercial relations to advance its strategic and military interests at the expense of the United States.
- 6 Maintain a substantive dialogue on climate issues.** There is little prospect for a significant agreement on climate change, but the U.S. can reassure its allies that it recognizes the role of carbon emissions in rising global temperatures and will carefully balance the costs of action and inaction on climate change.
- 7 Encourage European countries and the EU as a whole to adopt measures that prevent discriminatory boycotts against Israel.** While the U.S. and Europe may disagree about certain aspects of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, there is more common ground than recognized with regard to preventing discriminatory boycotts. For example, France has applied its robust anti-discrimination laws to limit the organizational activities of the BDS (boycott, divestment, and sanctions) movement. European governments can learn from the measures that 26 American states have put in place to hold accountable companies who support such boycotts. The EU should also clarify that anti-Israel boycotts sought by member states, such as Ireland, violate the EU’s exclusive jurisdiction over the bloc’s trade policy.



NORTH KOREA

David Maxwell and Mathew Ha



ABOVE: Military parade in North Korea.

RIGHT: South Korea holds anti-terror exercise.
(Photo by Chung Sung-Jun/Getty Images)

CURRENT POLICY | NORTH KOREA

After threatening Kim Jong Un with “fire and fury” and imposing unprecedented sanctions on North Korea, President Trump pivoted in 2018 to a policy of engagement with Kim, culminating in the first-ever summit between U.S. and North Korean leaders, held in Singapore this past June. Since the summit, U.S. diplomats have worked to translate the good will between Trump and Kim into meaningful steps toward denuclearization, while guarding against North Korean efforts to reap the benefits of engagement while offering only rhetorical concessions.

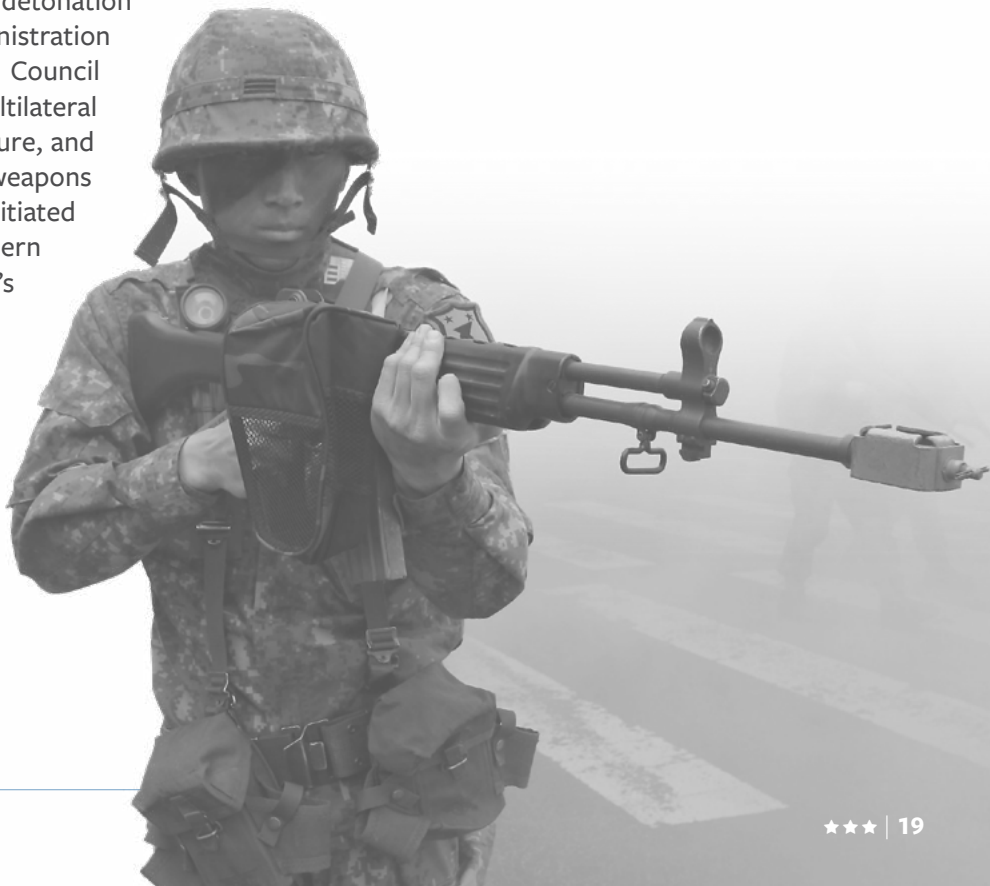
On June 30, 2017, President Trump met with South Korean President Moon Jae-in and agreed to “fully implement existing sanctions and impose new measures designed to apply maximum pressure” on North Korea in order to compel Pyongyang to negotiate its “complete, verifiable and irreversible denuclearization.”⁹

The tools for implementing this policy included the North Korean Sanctions and Policy Enhancement Act of 2016 and Executive Order 13810, which made it possible to sanction new targets with connections to illicit finance, cyberattacks, and human rights violations. In the face of over 40 ballistic missile and nuclear tests – including three ICBM tests possibly capable of striking the U.S. mainland – as well as the successful detonation of a thermonuclear device, the Trump administration responded with multiple UN Security Council resolutions to reinforce the existing multilateral sanctions regime. In the face of such pressure, and buttressed by a vastly improved nuclear weapons and ballistic missile program, North Korea initiated a process of diplomatic outreach to its southern neighbor, which soon led to the North’s participation in the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics. After the Olympics, Kim quickly arranged for his first summit meetings with the presidents of China and South Korea, before extending a surprise invitation in March to President Trump.

At the June 12 summit in Singapore, Trump and Kim displayed remarkable warmth toward each other, a marked change from the mutually hostile insults of

2017. In a joint statement with Trump, Kim committed “to work toward complete denuclearization of the Korean peninsula,” yet their statement neither provided a timeline for denuclearization nor steps toward North Korea’s disarmament.¹⁰ Surprising the Pentagon, President Trump also suspended exercises with the South Korean military, which he described as both very expensive and needlessly provocative. In addition, the president announced that Kim was already dismantling a ballistic missile engine test site.

A second Trump-Kim summit is now on the horizon, following the exchange of “love letters” and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo’s October trip to Pyongyang.¹¹ The administration cancelled a previous trip Pompeo had planned for August, since there had not been “sufficient progress” toward denuclearization. In advance of the first Trump-Kim summit, Pyongyang invited journalists to observe the demolition of the Punggye-ri nuclear test site. However, the credibility of this action is doubtful considering some reports suggested that prior nuclear tests destroyed this facility.¹² Pyongyang has characterized the U.S. objective of complete, verifiable, irreversible denuclearization as a “unilateral and gangster-like” demand that runs “counter to the spirit of the Singapore summit meeting and talks.”¹³ ■



ASSESSMENT | NORTH KOREA

It is difficult to know whether the Trump administration's maximum pressure campaign brought North Korea to the negotiating table, just as it remains uncertain whether Kim has made a strategic choice to abandon his nuclear program, or if the purpose of North Korean diplomacy is to protect its arsenal while dismantling the U.S. and UN sanctions regime.

There is no question that the Trump administration found significant targets for North Korea sanctions. It issued 156 Treasury designations in just its first 16 months, whereas the Obama administration issued only 154 designations in its eight-year tenure – and half of those came in 2016 in response to congressional pressure. Beyond this quantitative increase, the administration consistently targeted non-North Korean facilitators of Pyongyang's sanctions evasion schemes, including Chinese and Russians.¹⁴

While pressure from sanctions affected North Korea's bottom line, the highly visible progress of its nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs may have given it the necessary confidence to negotiate. In late 2017, after testing an intercontinental ballistic missile capable of reaching the United States, the North Korean government announced that it had “completed its state nuclear force.”¹⁵

The Trump administration had yet to fully implement its maximum pressure campaign when Kim Jong Un turned to engagement.

The Trump administration had yet to fully implement its maximum pressure campaign when Kim Jong Un turned to engagement. For example, it made only limited efforts to restrain Chinese financial institutions playing a critical role in North Korean sanctions evasion.¹⁶ Nor did the administration fully utilize the UN Panel of Experts' reports on North Korean sanctions evasion, which identified a comprehensive list of potential targets. Most of them remain unsanctioned.¹⁷ Even so, the administration's approach represented a dramatic reversal of the Obama administration's “strategic patience” policy.

The president often emphasizes that, on his watch, North Korea has stopped testing its ballistic missiles and nuclear weapons. Yet reducing the threat to the U.S. and its allies will require Kim to dismantle his weapons, not just pause their development. So far, North Korea's half-hearted concessions indicate that Pyongyang is not yet willing to act on its denuclearization pledge. Indeed, U.S. intelligence agencies divulged North Korea's ongoing production and proliferation activity.¹⁸ Nor has the U.S. pressed very hard for key concessions such as a full declaration of Pyongyang's nuclear capabilities, a program for verification, or a timeline for dismantlement.

To its credit, Washington continues to keep all sanctions enforced. However, following the Singapore summit, certain states, primarily China and Russia, loosened sanctions enforcement to undermine maximum pressure.¹⁹ In response, Washington designated additional Russian, Chinese, and other non-North Korean sanctions evaders.

The Trump administration has also worked to hold Pyongyang accountable for its continuing cyberattacks,²⁰ although it could do much more. In September 2018, the U.S. Department of Justice indicted a North Korean computer programmer, Pak Jin Hyok, for contributing to several cyberattacks. The U.S. Treasury followed suit by sanctioning Pak and a North Korean company.

Another looming challenge is managing the U.S. alliance with South Korea, since Seoul's enthusiasm for reconciliation is leading it to offer additional concessions to Pyongyang without reciprocal moves toward denuclearization. In September 2018, President Moon traveled to North Korea for a third summit where he and Kim committed to greater economic cooperation. Both countries want to move quickly toward a peace declaration and lifting of sanctions. South Korea's foreign minister even suggested Seoul should lift unilateral sanctions that it imposed after a North Korean torpedo sunk a South Korean naval vessel, killing 46 sailors, in 2010. In response, President Trump berated Seoul and suggested it could not make a decision “without our approval.”²¹ Sustaining coordination between Washington and Seoul will be critical to maintaining pressure on Pyongyang. The establishment of a strategy-working group in November should improve coordination.²² ■

RECOMMENDATIONS | NORTH KOREA

- 1 Remain focused on the essential goal of the final and fully verified dismantlement (FFVD) of North Korea's nuclear capability.** The president's unconventional, experimental, top-down diplomacy has created unique opportunities, but the question is whether it can deliver lasting results.
- 2 Establish a negotiating process that requires substantive action towards denuclearization.** Pyongyang has not participated in working-level talks. The newly appointed special representative for North Korea, Stephen Biegun, should have the authority to establish a negotiating process that would test Kim Jong Un's sincerity by requiring substantive and verifiable action toward denuclearization. The recent establishment of a U.S.-South Korea working group will be essential in allowing Biegun and his South Korean counterparts to lay the groundwork and balance President Trump's more unorthodox diplomatic efforts. This approach is preferable to seeking an elusive "grand bargain" that resolves all issues at once, but fails to establish the procedures necessary for sustainable progress.
- 3 Enforce sanctions until North Korea delivers on its pledge to denuclearize.** The simultaneous pursuit of talks and punishment of sanctions violators will show that the U.S. is intent on achieving a non-nuclear North Korea through peaceful means. Washington should investigate and sanction Chinese banks that process North Korean transactions through the U.S. financial system. The Trump administration should continue to target the North Korean shipping sector and the Chinese and Russian enablers that help it to evade import and export controls. The UN Panel of Experts has already identified many likely perpetrators.
- 4 Ensure that negotiations address the Kim family regime's abhorrent human rights violations, offensive cyber program, conventional military capability, and non-nuclear weapons of mass destruction.** Leaving these issues unaddressed obstructs the establishment of genuine peace and trust between the two Koreas. More importantly, the North Korea Sanctions and Policy Enhancement Act of 2016 legally obligates the administration to address these other non-nuclear issues when dealing with North Korea.
- 5 Make clear that Trump will walk away from the table and implement a maximum pressure "2.0" campaign if sufficient progress is not made toward denuclearization.** Trump should privately tell Kim (and Moon) that if negotiations fail, the U.S. will not only ramp up sanctions pressure, but also will harden the U.S.-South Korean combined defense to ensure that North Korea will be quickly and decisively defeated if it chooses to take military action.



South Korean Navy vessels taking part in a drill off the east coast on September 4, 2017 in South Korea. The exercise took place two days after a North Korean nuclear test, which was condemned by world leaders. (Photo by South Korean Defense Ministry/Getty Images)



CHINA

Mathew Ha and Eric Lorber



ABOVE: A shipping container is offloaded from the Hong Kong-based CSCL East China Sea container ship at the Port of Oakland on June 20, 2018 in Oakland, California. (Photo by Justin Sullivan/Getty Images)

RIGHT: Members of a Chinese military honor guard shout outside the Great Hall of the People on September 13, 2017 in Beijing, China. (Photo by Etienne Oliveau/Getty Images)

CURRENT POLICY | CHINA

“Every year,” says the Trump administration’s National Security Strategy, “competitors such as China steal U.S. intellectual property valued at hundreds of billions of dollars.” The purpose of Beijing’s centrally directed effort is not only to enrich China at our expense, but “to shape a world antithetical to U.S. values and interests.”²³ According to the Pentagon, “The central challenge to U.S. prosperity and security is [this] *re-emergence of long-term strategic competition*” (emphasis in original).²⁴

The Trump administration has described the threat from Beijing more starkly than its predecessors. In a landmark October 2018 speech,²⁵ Vice President Mike Pence previewed what one scholar described as “the biggest shift in U.S.-China relations since Henry Kissinger’s 1971 visit to Beijing.”²⁶ Pence described China’s comprehensive foreign policy as marked by military, economic, political, and ideological aggression against U.S. interests across the globe and within the United States. The U.S. once ignored China’s hostile actions, but Pence declared, “those days are over.”

To hold Beijing accountable for its predatory commercial practices, the administration has employed a range of measures, including tariffs on \$50 billion of Chinese goods, which went into effect in August 2018. When China retaliated with tariffs on \$50 billion of U.S. goods, President Trump raised the ante by extending U.S. import duties to an additional \$200 billion of Chinese imports. China responded again with tariffs on another \$60 billion of U.S. goods.²⁷ As of December 2018, Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping

agreed to a tariff truce that gives their negotiators 90 days to reach a deal.

Beyond tariffs, the Department of Justice established a China Initiative designed to target Beijing’s economic espionage. In October 2018, the department announced the indictment of a Chinese state-owned company for attempting to steal billions of dollars in trade secrets from Micron, an Idaho-based semi-conductor company.

The Trump administration also called out China’s efforts to dominate East Asia by “using predatory economics to intimidate its neighbors while militarizing features in the South China Sea.”²⁸ The administration has also relied on freedom of navigation operations to make clear that it does not recognize the legality of this militarization.

The administration has also developed and begun to implement its “Indo-Pacific Economic Vision” to counter China’s attempts to build global influence through its “One Belt One Road” initiative. The U.S. effort includes \$113 million in direct government investment and additional loan incentives for private firms doing business in the Indo-Pacific. A key goal is to provide development assistance without the many, often draconian, strings that China attaches to its funding. The Better Utilization of Investment Leading to Development (BUILD) Act, passed on October 5, 2018, will be an important component to achieve these goals. ■



ASSESSMENT | CHINA

The Trump administration has effectively highlighted the seriousness of the challenge from Beijing, which some in the foreign policy community and general public tended to ignore until very recently. Looking ahead, the administration needs to refine its strategy for countering Beijing.

Escalating tariffs have so far had limited negative effects on key macroeconomic indicators in the U.S., whereas China has suffered more significant setbacks. China's GDP growth has gradually decelerated, with the Shanghai stock exchange losing more than 25 percent of its value in 2018. Still, individual firms face substantial costs because Chinese goods cost more and Chinese tariffs damage U.S. exports. In late 2018, growing fears of a full-scale trade war contributed to escalating volatility in the U.S. stock market. Fears of a U.S. recession in 2019 or 2020 may reduce U.S. leverage.

The administration also disrupted its own focus on China's unfair policies by initiating trade disputes with longstanding partners in North America, Europe, and Asia. Abandoning the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) has also made Washington's strategy to counter China more difficult to implement successfully. However, the administration did secure an important clause in the new United States, Mexico, Canada Agreement (USMCA) prohibiting parties from entering into a new free trade agreement with non-market economies like China.²⁹

Beyond tariffs, the Trump administration has drawn greater attention to Beijing's concerted effort to erode America's innovation base. The National Security Strategy correctly identified the threat of cyber-enabled economic warfare, in which an adversary seeks to undermine the economic foundation on which our national security rests.³⁰ In response, Congress succeeded in passing the Foreign Investment Risk Review Modernization Act (FIRRMA), which broadens the scope of oversight exercised by the interagency Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States. The administration also launched a widespread campaign against key Chinese companies deemed to pose the greatest cyber threat to U.S. interests, especially the telecommunications giants Huawei and ZTE. Britain's largest telecom service provider, BT, also decided to remove Huawei's equipment from its existing 3G and 4G wireless networks and will bar Huawei's products from

participating in the core of its 5G networks. Additionally, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and potentially Canada have restricted Huawei's access to their markets.

However, the administration needs to continue to work to convince the U.S. private sector of the threat China poses, and of the need to work with the U.S. government to counter that threat. To date, certain major U.S. corporations, particularly those in the high-tech sector, have evinced an unwillingness to cooperate with U.S. defense and intelligence agencies to jointly develop key technologies important in the strategic competition with China, such as artificial intelligence and quantum computing.

As China continues projecting power by militarizing the South China Sea, the Trump administration arguably has not crafted a cohesive strategy to counter Beijing's provocative actions there. Although the Navy has undertaken freedom of navigation operations and the administration has continued arm sales to Taipei and increased defense commitments to India, China's militarization has continued apace.

In North Korea, Trump's maximum pressure campaign succeeded in winning unprecedented Chinese cooperation on sanctions in 2017. But as Trump turned to direct diplomacy with North Korea in 2018 and tensions eased, Chinese sanctions enforcement appears to have weakened.³¹

The State Department continues to report that Beijing relies on torture, forced disappearances, pervasive censorship, and severe repression of activists to preserve its grip on power.

One area that has not received enough attention is China's human rights abuses. The State Department continues to report that Beijing relies on torture, forced disappearances, pervasive censorship, and severe repression of activists to preserve its grip on power.³² Most notably, the Chinese government's detention of approximately one million Uighur Muslims in the Xinjiang region is a landmark example of China's human rights abuses.³³ To date, the administration has not taken sufficient action in response to these abuses. ■

RECOMMENDATIONS | CHINA

- 1 Finalize trade agreements in Europe and Asia that include provisions prohibiting free trade agreements with non-market economies like China.** Our European and Asian partners also have much to fear from China's predatory practices. Working together against those practices should be paramount.
- 2 Help Asian allies upgrade their capabilities to defend against Chinese naval aggression.** The U.S. must do more to empower regional allies to counter China's coercive efforts in the South China Sea in addition to ongoing freedom of navigation operations. The Trump administration should consider establishing new multinational exercises in the South China Sea to help U.S. allies expand their capabilities and capacity.
- 3 Exercise leadership in key multilateral forums, including ASEAN, APEC, and the East Asia Summit.** Our allies feel more confident when the United States drives the agenda inside these forums. Senior level U.S. officials – including the president – should take an active role in these forums.
- 4 Emphasize human rights in both bilateral and multilateral forums. Consider funding for international broadcasting programs and other efforts to evade censorship.** The administration should act swiftly to address Beijing's incarceration in re-education camps of up to one million Chinese Uighurs in western China's Xinjiang province. In August 2018, a bipartisan group of senior lawmakers sent a letter to the secretary of state and secretary of the Treasury urging the administration to impose sanctions against Chinese officials overseeing this draconian program, yet the administration has yet to act.
- 5 Hold China accountable for easing North Korea sanctions enforcement as well as providing a safe haven for North Korean illicit activity through front companies and financial institutions within its borders.** Washington should consider additional punitive measures against such entities and individuals if they continue violating existing UN and U.S. sanctions.
- 6 Carefully monitor Beijing's compliance with U.S. sanctions on Iran, in particular the proper use of escrow accounts holding Chinese payments for Iranian oil.** In the past, Iran pursued elaborate money laundering schemes, often with the complicity of foreign officials, to exfiltrate hard currency from its escrow accounts.



U.S. President Donald Trump is flanked by members of the business community as he signs a presidential memorandum aimed at what he calls Chinese economic aggression in the Roosevelt Room at the White House on March 22, 2018 in Washington, DC. (Photo by Mark Wilson/Getty Images)



RUSSIA

Boris Zilberman



ABOVE: Battle tanks during the military parade to mark the 70th anniversary of World War II in Moscow, Russia. (Photo by RIA Novosti/Getty Images)

RIGHT: Javelin anti-tank missile. (Wikimedia Commons)

CURRENT POLICY | RUSSIA

There has been a sharp divergence between the Trump administration's firm course of action toward Russia and the president's controversial defense of Russian President Vladimir Putin from accusations of grave human rights violations and interference in U.S. elections.

On the military front, the Trump administration has continued to support imperiled U.S. allies on the Russian periphery. In April 2018, the administration provided Javelin anti-tank missiles to Ukraine, a move the Obama administration rejected as too provocative. The U.S. Air Force also participated in the first air exercise in Ukraine in 2018, which built upon previous ground exercises between U.S. and Ukrainian troops.

The administration likewise delivered anti-tank weapons to Georgia last year and held important military exercises with the Georgians on the 10th anniversary of the Russian invasion in 2008. This past April, President Trump hosted the presidents of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania at the White House, and announced a \$170 million military assistance package, U.S. troop participation in multinational exercises, and funding to fight disinformation campaigns from Moscow.

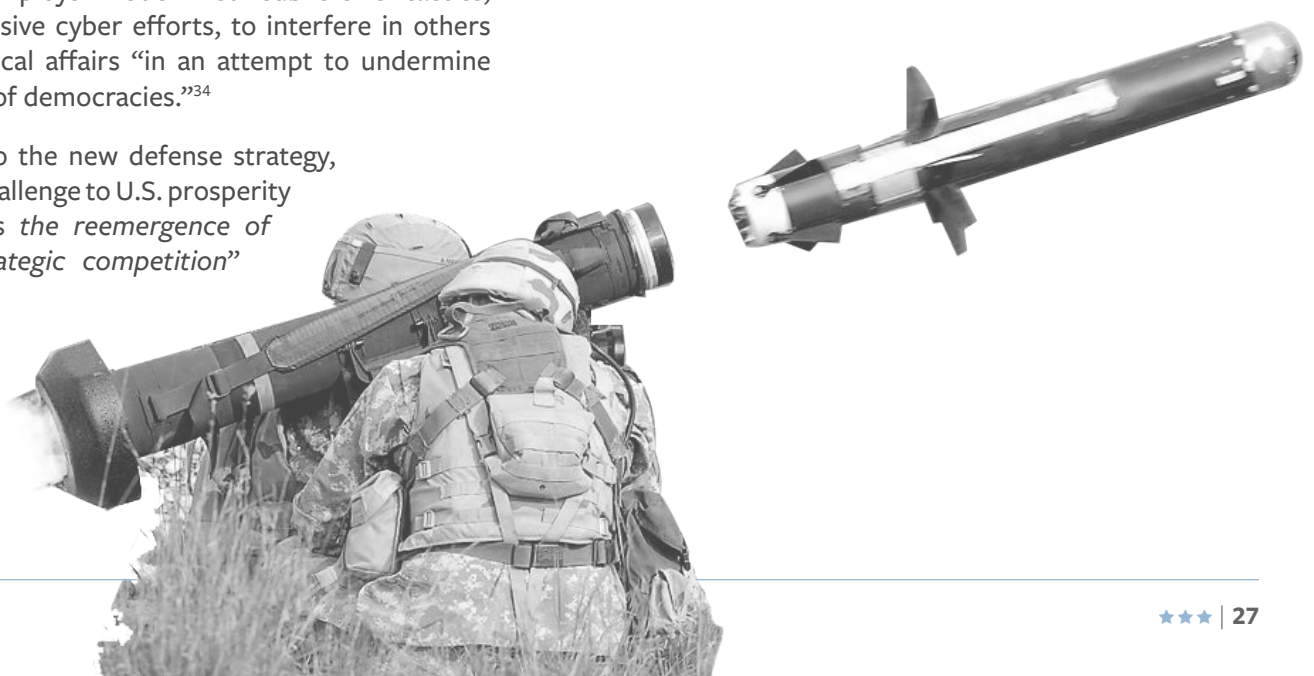
The administration's National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy clearly identify Russia as a critical threat. The former singles out Russia, along with China, as a major power that wants "to shape a world antithetical to U.S. values and interests." It warns, "Russia aims to weaken U.S. influence in the world and divide us from our allies and partners." The strategy describes how Russia employs modernized subversive tactics, including offensive cyber efforts, to interfere in others domestic political affairs "in an attempt to undermine the legitimacy of democracies."³⁴

According to the new defense strategy, "The central challenge to U.S. prosperity and security is *the reemergence of long-term, strategic competition*"

with Russia and China (emphasis in original). The U.S. cannot avoid this conflict because its great power adversaries seek hegemony "in the form of veto authority over other nations' economic, diplomatic, and security decisions."³⁵

The administration has employed law enforcement measures and economic sanctions as a principal means of confronting immediate challenges posed by Russia. For example, the Treasury Department issued sanctions designations against those connected with cyberattacks on behalf of the Russian military and intelligence services, while the Department of Justice has handed down indictments against those working to undermine the U.S. political system. In October 2018, U.S. Cyber Command also indicated that it had started operations to deter Russian operatives from interfering in the U.S. political system. However, large gaps remain, particularly at the state and local level and in the private sector.

In part, it is difficult for the government to mobilize when the president disputes, as he did at the Helsinki Summit, the intelligence community's finding that Russia has interfered in U.S. elections. Similarly, the U.S. cannot pursue a vigorous human rights policy if the president does not acknowledge that Putin is responsible for killing dissidents both at home and abroad. ■



ASSESSMENT | RUSSIA

The administration appears to be pursuing two Russia policies at once, a contradiction that prevents either from being fully effective. The president's effort to improve ties with Russia has not gained traction, largely due to Moscow's intransigence and malign activity. Yet efforts to hold Russia accountable for its aggression and subversion are also not fully effective due to the president's resistance to exerting personal pressure on his Russian counterpart.

The administration appears to be pursuing two Russia policies at once, a contradiction that prevents either from being fully effective.

The president's approach is also at odds with broad bipartisan support in Congress for holding Russia accountable. The most important expression of this sentiment was overwhelming support for the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA), which the president signed in 2017 since Congress would have easily overridden a veto.

American policy has imposed significant costs on Russia, yet there is no clear indication that these have affected Putin's strategic calculus. Treasury's April 2018 sanctions against Russian oligarchs sent the Russian market reeling as well as hurting those individuals and entities designated.³⁶ The administration's congressionally mandated list of Russian oligarchs continues to cause consternation for those who are listed publicly, while generating ample speculation about who might be included in the classified version.

Alongside its designation of over 200 individuals and entities, the administration ordered the closure of six diplomatic facilities and the removal of 60 spies from the United States over the past two years. As Wess Mitchell, the assistant secretary of state for European and Eurasian affairs, explained in congressional testimony, "Our policy

remains unchanged: steady cost-imposition until Russia changes course."³⁷ That change has yet to happen.

In Ukraine, the Russian invasion has settled into a long and bloody conflict in the country's easternmost provinces. The implementation of essential domestic reforms continues to be an uphill battle for Kyiv. Without stability and prosperity for ordinary Ukrainians, the Kremlin's wait-it-out approach is likely to succeed. American support for the Baltic states has been consistent, yet their leaders fear being sacrificed as part of a broader U.S.-Russia agreement.

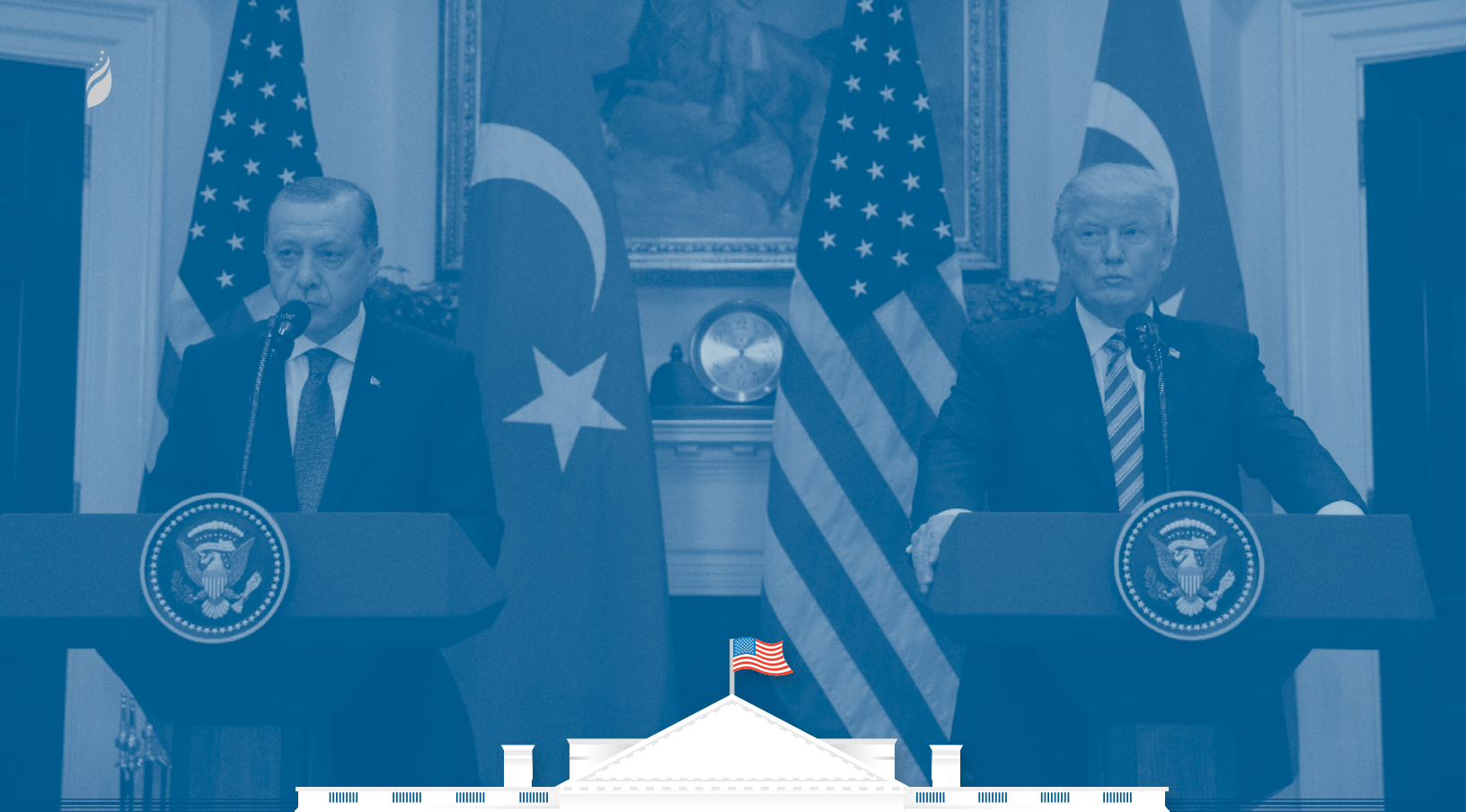
In the Middle East and North Africa, the administration sorely lacks a strategy for countering Russia's growing influence. Moscow has proven repeatedly that when there is a cleavage in U.S. relations with a regional partner or a power vacuum, it is happy to step in and exploit the situation. The planned drawdown of U.S. troops in Syria and potentially other areas will only help increase Moscow's influence with our friends and foes. Russia is already courting Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and the Sisi government in Egypt while working to establish inroads among the warring factions in Libya.

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At home, Russia remains as repressive as ever, while its agents have employed chemical weapons to poison opponents abroad. Putin has little reason to fear that even his most brazen acts will provoke the U.S. to challenge the fundamental legitimacy of his regime. ■

RECOMMENDATIONS | RUSSIA

- 1 Rebuild bipartisan and allied consensus.** The continued perception that the president gives special deference to Vladimir Putin has been counterproductive both domestically and with our transatlantic allies. Rebuilding consensus depends on acknowledging basic truths about Putin's repression at home and aggression abroad, in both the physical and cyber domains.
- 2 Articulate a comprehensive strategy clearly endorsed by the president.** The administration's national strategy documents provide strong guidance, yet the president's statements suggest he does not see their words as his own. The administration should put together a comprehensive strategy toward Russia that explains what it seeks in the U.S.-Russia relationship. The new strategy's effectiveness will depend on a clear presidential endorsement. Congress requested a similar strategy on China and should do the same for Russia if no such strategy from the administration is forthcoming.
- 3 Vigorously enforce current sanctions while advancing new designations and other forms of financial pressure.** The Trump administration should sanction additional oligarchs and related entities engaged in illicit activities. Where appropriate, it should also add more individuals to the public list by declassifying names from the classified annex of the oligarch report. Similarly, it should ban U.S. financial institutions from acquiring new Russian sovereign debt, help to stand up effective financial intelligence units in Europe's capitals, and increase cooperation with transatlantic allies to ferret out illicit financial streams linked to the Kremlin and its inner circle. Finally, it should implement punitive measures outlined by the Chemical and Biological Weapons Control and Warfare Elimination Action of 1991 for Russia's noncompliance.
- 4 Counter Russian influence in the Middle East.** The administration's new Russia strategy should confirm that countering malign Russian influence in the Middle East and North Africa is in the national security interest of the United States. To advance this goal, the administration should document and publicize Russian atrocities in Syria as well as Moscow's facilitation of atrocities committed by others; nominate or seek confirmation of ambassadors to Libya, Egypt, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia; prioritize concerns about Russia in Washington's bilateral relationship with Egypt; and reassert a more visible diplomatic role in Libya by appointing a special envoy and expanding cooperation in key areas such as energy.
- 5 Pressure Russia to stop facilitating North Korean sanctions evasion.** Russia remains a leading facilitator of North Korean sanctions evasion despite its support for the UN Security Council resolutions that progressively tightened the sanctions. The president should consistently challenge this misconduct, as he did in his January 2018 observation that Moscow "is not helping us at all with North Korea."³⁸ Likewise, the Treasury Department should continue to sanction Russian individuals, firms, banks, vessels, and port service providers that aid North Korea.
- 6 Challenge Russia's human rights abuses.** Given the efforts the Kremlin has taken to push back against the adoption of the Magnitsky and Global Magnitsky Acts, it is clear that human rights continue to be one of the most effective pressure tools Washington has. The Trump administration should continue to identify and designate Russian officials that have been involved in the extrajudicial killing or unlawful incarceration of regime opponents. President Trump and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo should highlight such cases in public and in broader bilateral negotiations. Putin must understand there will continue to be a price for human rights abuses.



TURKEY

Aykan Erdemir and Merve Tahiroglu



ABOVE: U.S. President Donald J. Trump and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan deliver joint statements in the Roosevelt Room of the White House on May 16, 2017 in Washington, DC. (Photo by Michael Reynolds-Pool/Getty Images)

RIGHT: Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan makes a speech during a ceremony at the Presidential Palace on July 9, 2018 in Ankara, Turkey. (Photo by Stringer/Getty Images)

CURRENT POLICY | TURKEY

In January 2017, the Trump administration inherited a U.S. relationship with Turkey already in dire straits. Since his ascent to power in 2002, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan had transformed Turkey from a Western-oriented secular republic into an authoritarian regime with a democratic façade. Erdogan's iron-fisted rule and pan-Islamist ambitions – including support for the Muslim Brotherhood and Iran – set Ankara and Washington on a collision course, sparking bilateral crises that culminated with the U.S. imposing sanctions on a fellow member of NATO to secure the release of an American hostage.

President Trump initially tried to mend the U.S.-Turkish relationship by warming up to Erdogan and delaying confrontations over major sticking points. In September 2017, Trump called Erdogan “a friend,” and fist-bumped the Turkish president in July 2018 for “doing things the right way.”³⁹

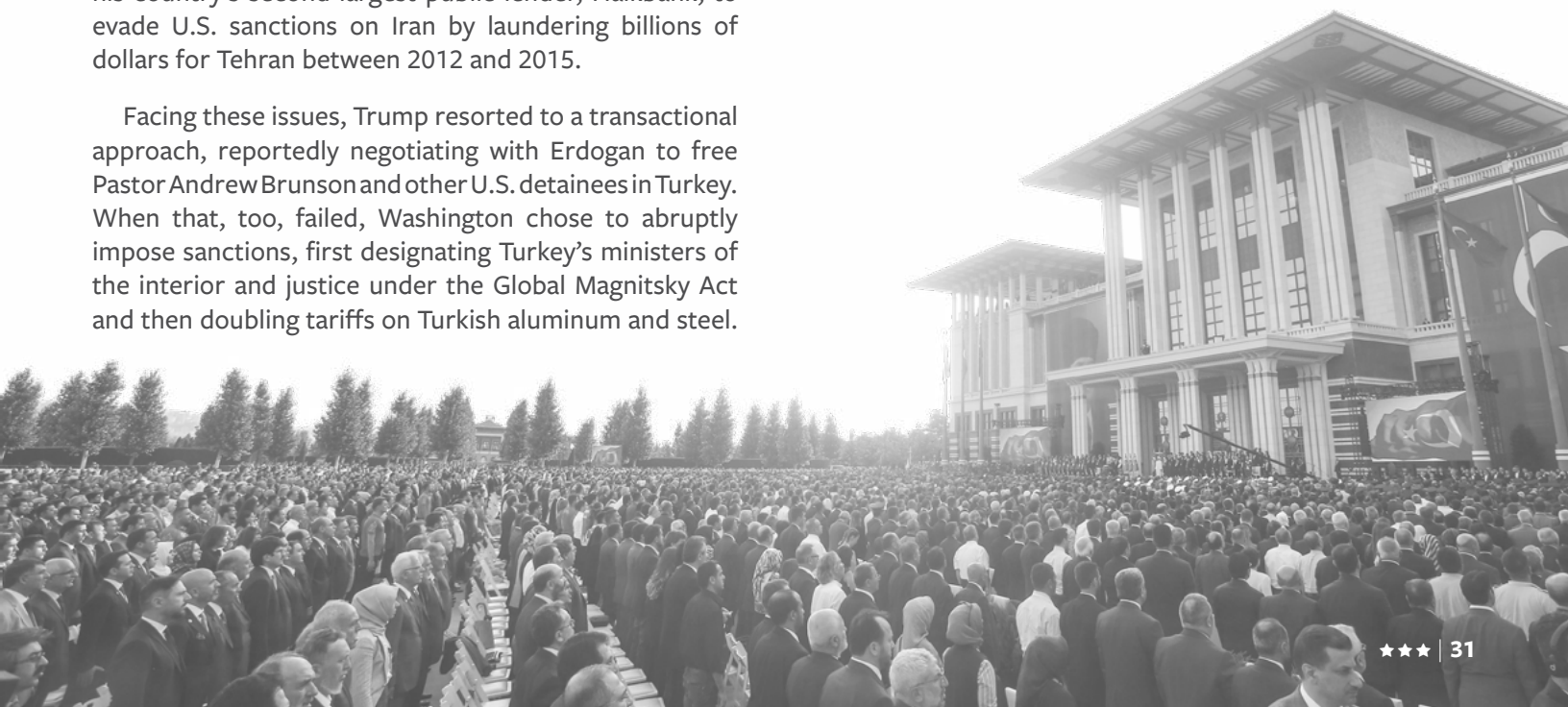
Trump's personal outreach to Erdogan, however, failed to deter new provocations. Instead, the Turkish president took this praise from Trump as *carte blanche* to escalate harassment of U.S. citizens and consular employees, who continue to face prosecution on farcical or dubious charges. These moves are part of Erdogan's campaign of “hostage diplomacy,” through which he has used U.S. and European detainees as bargaining chips to extract political concessions.⁴⁰ Erdogan also lambasted the U.S. for putting on trial a Turkish banker who facilitated a government-sanctioned conspiracy at his country's second-largest public lender, Halkbank, to evade U.S. sanctions on Iran by laundering billions of dollars for Tehran between 2012 and 2015.

Facing these issues, Trump resorted to a transactional approach, reportedly negotiating with Erdogan to free Pastor Andrew Brunson and other U.S. detainees in Turkey. When that, too, failed, Washington chose to abruptly impose sanctions, first designating Turkey's ministers of the interior and justice under the Global Magnitsky Act and then doubling tariffs on Turkish aluminum and steel.

Two months later, Turkey freed Pastor Brunson, whom Trump soon welcomed to the White House. But at least one other U.S. citizen and three consular workers remain in jail or under house arrest.⁴¹

Another contentious issue has been Erdogan's intention to purchase Russia's S-400 surface-to-air missile system, despite those batteries' incompatibility with NATO equipment and the risk of compromising the F-35 jets' stealth capabilities. In July, Congress legislated to block the sale of F-35s to Turkey until Ankara scrapped its S-400 deal. For its part, the Pentagon balked at the suggestion, and the administration instead decided to offer Turkey its Patriot defense system as an alternative to the Russian S-400.

In Syria, the Trump administration has sought to address Erdogan's concerns about the U.S. military's partnership with the People's Protection Units (YPG), a Syrian Kurdish militia, in the war against the Islamic State. The YPG remains anathema to Erdogan because of its ties to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Turkey, which both Washington and Ankara consider a terrorist group. After announcing the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Syria in December 2018, reportedly at Erdogan's request, Trump declared that Ankara would assume responsibility to “eradicate whatever is left of ISIS.”⁴² Nonetheless, Trump and his senior advisors later said that it remained U.S. policy to protect America's Syrian Kurdish partners from Ankara. ■



ASSESSMENT | TURKEY

The Trump administration's transactional and personality-driven approach to Erdogan has failed to address the strategic issues that are the ultimate cause of bilateral tension. Negotiating with Erdogan on an ad-hoc basis without addressing his broader realignment of Turkey away from NATO only rewards the Turkish strongman while emboldening him to commit further offenses.

Erdogan certainly prefers to steer his relationship with the U.S. at the interpersonal level, banking on his personal rapport with Trump to paper over any conflicts. Indeed, Erdogan poured millions of dollars into Washington's lobbyists to curry the administration's favor.⁴³ The impact of such spending is difficult to assess, but Trump chose to overlook some extraordinary transgressions, likely endowing the Turkish president with a sense of impunity. In May 2017, Erdogan's bodyguards and loyalists beat up American protestors in Washington – dialing up the intimidation tactics first employed against U.S.-based dissidents at the Brookings Institution in March 2016. Yet the administration again swept the incident under the rug: The Department of Justice briefly opened an investigation but dropped the charges within months.

But Erdogan is unlikely to end his hostage diplomacy if, as reports indicate, Trump made concessions in exchange for the pastor's release.

The circumstances that encouraged Erdogan's hostage diplomacy were similar. While detentions began in 2016, Washington only issued a warning after Turkey arrested a third consular employee in 2017. By then, Trump had already begun the reported negotiations with Erdogan for a prisoner swap, signaling his willingness to yield concessions for the release of innocent detainees. Sensing no limits, Erdogan kept pushing his hand until Washington retaliated with sanctions and tariffs in the summer of 2018. Turkey released Pastor Brunson last October, apparently as a result of U.S. pressure. But Erdogan is unlikely to end his hostage diplomacy if, as reports indicate, Trump made concessions in exchange for the pastor's release.⁴⁴

Washington has also failed to convince Erdogan that it will hold accountable all those who facilitate evasion of its sanctions on Iran. Ankara has consistently challenged the legitimacy of U.S. sanctions, which it violated on a massive scale before 2015, as the Halkbank case proved last year. Yet the Treasury Department has not yet issued any fines against the bank for those crimes, fueling Ankara's efforts to dismiss its past transgressions. Nonetheless, in November, Trump not only afforded Turkey an exemption that allows its continued oil trade with Iran despite sanctions, but also reportedly began negotiating with Erdogan for a lenient fine on Halkbank – moves that encourage Erdogan's further noncompliance.⁴⁵

There is also little reason to believe that Erdogan is either able or willing to take over the counter-Islamic State campaign in Syria.

There is also little reason to believe that Erdogan is either able or willing to take over the counter-Islamic State campaign in Syria.⁴⁶ Rather, Turkey remains focused on the threat it perceives from the YPG. In the absence of U.S. troops, Turkish-Kurdish hostilities could disrupt the stability of northeastern Syria, which U.S. efforts had secured. The YPG has already turned to Moscow and Damascus for protection, thus enabling them to reassert control of the key terrain and resources in northeast Syria, where U.S. forces now operate. Similarly, in a bid to destroy the YPG, Ankara is now also likely to negotiate and cooperate more with U.S. adversaries including Russia, Iran, and the Syrian regime. ■



Mehmet Hakan Atilla from Halkbank in Turkey in 2015. (YouTube screen shot)

RECOMMENDATIONS | TURKEY

The immediate challenge facing Washington is how to dispel Erdogan's belief that he can get away with taking hostages, violating sanctions, and threatening the U.S. and its partners. Until then, Turkey's drift away from NATO will continue apace, with little hope for its return to the norms of the transatlantic alliance.

- 1 Resist Erdogan's hostage diplomacy.** The U.S. and Europe should devise a concerted response based on the principle that ransoms are unacceptable. The Trump administration should also press just as hard for the release of the one remaining U.S. citizen and three consular employees as it did for the release of Pastor Brunson. Likewise, it should continually raise the issue of Ankara's mistreatment of its own citizens and relentless assault on their civil liberties.
- 2 Pursue legal action to ensure Turkey's compliance with sanctions on Iran.** First and foremost, Treasury must follow up on the Justice Department's case against Halkbank with a fine proportionate to the underlying crimes. The prosecution of additional conspirators, as well as the designation of implicated Turkish officials under the Global Magnitsky Act, would also send a strong message.
- 3 Encourage Turkey to pursue the Kurdish peace process at home and a modus vivendi with the Syrian Kurds.** The U.S. should work with its European partners and use transatlantic leverage over the PKK and its affiliates to facilitate the Kurdish peace process within Turkey and prevent the escalation of fighting between Turkish and YPG forces in Syria. Such a comprehensive framework will not only avoid a vacuum that could lead to a jihadist resurgence in Syria, but would also help thwart a potential rapprochement between Turkey and the Syrian regime while reducing Ankara's tactical dependence on Russia.
- 4 Prevent Erdogan from buying Russian S-400s.** Ankara does not appear to realize that the purchase will violate U.S. law and trigger sanctions. While the U.S. hopes to overturn Turkey's S-400 deal by offering Patriot missiles, Erdogan has announced his intention to purchase both defense systems. To induce a change in Turkish policy towards the S-400, Washington needs to convey more clearly the full range of consequences of the Turkish government's procurement of sanctioned Russian hardware.
- 5 Capitalize on Turkey's current financial conundrum to encourage its return to the rules-based global order.** As Turkey braces for the implementation of one of the biggest-ever IMF bailout packages, Ankara has little choice but to accept the strings attached to it. Turkey's transatlantic allies must ensure that any bailout is preconditioned on good governance, requiring Ankara to undertake reforms to improve Turkey's accountability, transparency, and rule of law.
- 6 Encourage Turkey to improve relations with Israel and Greece, and resolve the Cyprus problem.** The newfound natural gas reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean pose a historic opportunity to normalize Turkey's ties to Israel and Cyprus. The most viable route for Israel's gas exports to Europe is through Turkey, and the inclusion of a reunified Cyprus would optimize the trade. Now more than ever, Turkey's interests converge with that of Israel, Cyprus, and Greece. Washington should remind its ally that such a realignment may well offer Turkey its best chance to overhaul its Customs Union agreement and resuscitate its EU membership process.



SYRIA

David Adesnik and Toby Dershowitz



ABOVE: A fighter of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) stands in an empty street in the western neighborhood of Jazrah on the outskirts of Raqqa on October 30, 2017 in Raqqa, Syria. (Photo by Chris McGrath/Getty Images)

RIGHT: Syrian President Bashar al-Assad on July 6, 2008 in Damascus, Syria. (Photo by Thayer Ganaim/PPO via Getty Images)

CURRENT POLICY | SYRIA

In December 2018, President Trump ordered the withdrawal of all U.S. troops from Syria. “We have won against ISIS. We’ve beaten them, and we’ve beaten them badly,” Trump announced, “Now it’s time for our troops to come back home.”⁴⁷

The president’s decision amounted to a complete and sudden reversal of the policy his principal advisers had developed, which relied on the presence of roughly 2,000 U.S. troops and their local partners to crush the remnants of the Islamic State. The president’s advisers also sought to expel all Iranian-controlled forces from Syria while supporting UN-led negotiations to end the Syrian civil war. The U.S. military mission in Syria does not include offensive operations against the Iranian-controlled forces fighting on behalf of the Bashar al-Assad regime, but the presence of U.S. troops and their local partners generates substantial diplomatic leverage.

As a candidate in 2016, Trump made clear his aversion to continued involvement in Syria for any purpose other than defeating the Islamic State. “I don’t like Assad at all, but Assad is killing ISIS. Russia is killing ISIS. And Iran is killing ISIS,” he said.⁴⁸ Surprisingly, Trump then chose in April 2017 to punish the Assad regime’s use of chemical weapons by launching 59 cruise missiles at military targets in Syria. A year later, he launched a second round of airstrikes after Assad used chemical weapons again.

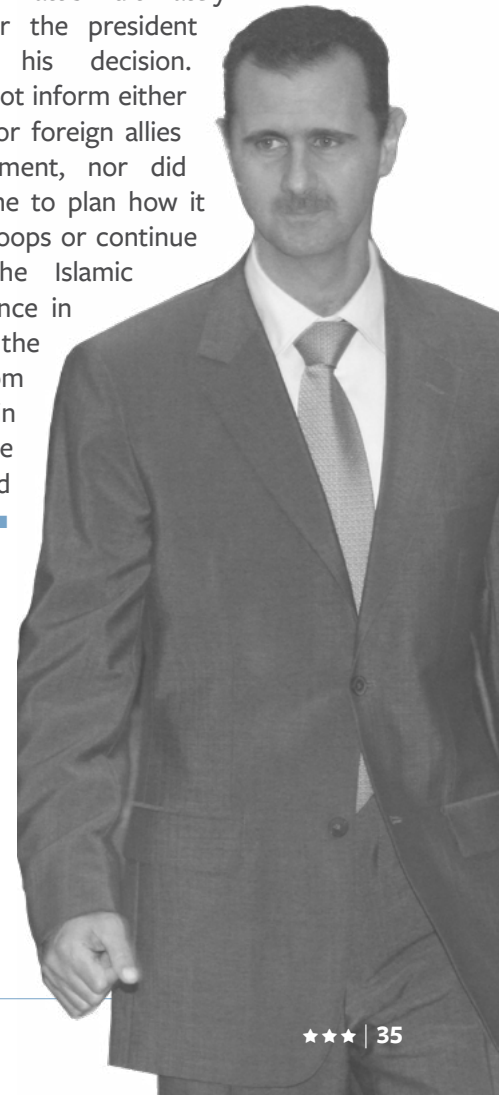
In 2017, the U.S. focused on defeating the Islamic State, whose “capital” of Raqqa in northern Syria fell in October to the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), in which Kurdish fighters play an outsized role. Trump sought to avoid further entanglement by reaching an agreement with Russian President Vladimir Putin for Russian troops to monitor a ceasefire that would prevent Assad’s forces as well as Iran and its proxies from approaching the Syrian border with Israel in the Golan Heights.

In early 2018, the administration began to address the long-term threat posed by Iran’s military presence in Syria. By maintaining troops in the northeast, the U.S. could prevent a resurgence of the Islamic State while keeping a resource-rich and strategically significant part of the country out of the hands of Assad and Iran. Then, in March, the president unexpectedly announced at a public rally that the U.S. would be leaving Syria

“very soon.” “Let the other people take care of it now,” Trump said, “We are going to get back to our country, where we belong, where we want to be.”⁴⁹ On the advice of his national security team, Trump quietly postponed consideration of a withdrawal.

In the summer of 2018, Russian forces, Assad’s troops and Iranian-backed militias violated the ceasefire Trump had negotiated with Putin, in the process deliberately bombing hospitals and civilian targets once again. Top administration officials made clear the U.S. would not hand Syria over to the Assad-Russia-Iran coalition. National Security Adviser John Bolton asserted in September, “We’re not going to leave [Syria] as long as Iranian troops are outside Iranian borders.”⁵⁰

The president reportedly made the decision to withdraw from Syria during a phone call with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Trump’s principal advisers argued that the withdrawal would be a serious mistake, with Secretary of Defense James Mattis ultimately resigning shortly after the president publicly announced his decision. Moreover, Trump did not inform either congressional leaders or foreign allies before his announcement, nor did the Pentagon have time to plan how it would withdraw the troops or continue operations against the Islamic State without a presence in Syria. The timeline for the U.S. withdrawal from Syria remains uncertain for now, although the Pentagon announced the process has begun. ■



ASSESSMENT | SYRIA

President Trump justified his decision to withdraw from Syria by erroneously and repeatedly asserting that the Islamic State had been defeated. Rather than recognizing the low cost and high impact of the mission in Syria, the president described it as a waste of soldiers' lives and taxpayer dollars. Instead of acknowledging that America's Kurdish and Arab partners fought a bloody ground war against the Islamic State, Trump suggested that only U.S. troops were engaged in fighting.

The process by which Trump arrived at his decision was also deeply flawed. He reversed a long-standing policy within a matter of days, leaving his own administration scrambling to contain the fallout.

The process by which Trump arrived at his decision was also deeply flawed. He reversed a long-standing policy within a matter of days, leaving his own administration scrambling to contain the fallout. The decision blindsided allied nations with troops in Syria as well as local partners who continue to suffer heavy casualties while fighting the Islamic State. Trump's secretary of state, secretary of defense, and national security adviser all opposed the withdrawal. While a commander-in-chief has the right to overrule his advisers, Trump ignored the serious concerns they raised.

In addition to damaging the campaign against the Islamic State, the withdrawal from Syria undermines the president's own strategy "to counter the [Iranian] regime's destabilizing activity and support for terrorist proxies in the region."⁵¹ The Assad regime plays a central role in what Iran calls its "axis of resistance." For decades, Tehran has relied on Damascus as a conduit to pass funding and weapons to Hezbollah, enabling it to dominate Lebanon and prepare for a devastating war with Israel. In addition to protecting Assad, Iran is also building up its offensive capabilities in Syria so it can attack Israel directly.

At present, Iran relies mainly on air transport to bring men and materiel into Syria, but has begun to build a "land bridge," or ground corridor, through which it could project power from western Iran to the Mediterranean. Effective U.S. control of northeast Syria blocks one potential route for the land bridge. The U.S. and its local partners also

have a base further south at al-Tanf, along the Syrian-Iraqi border, which prevents Iran from establishing control of the main highway from Baghdad to Damascus. A withdrawal opens these routes to Iran and its allies.

A retreat from Syria would also provide substantial benefits to the Turkish president, an avowed Islamist with a record of human rights abuses. Erdogan has already disrupted the campaign against the Islamic State multiple times by launching military operations against the Syrian Kurds, and has threatened another offensive. Trump argues that the U.S. can trust Erdogan to prosecute the war against the Islamic State in Syria, yet it is doubtful whether the Turkish president has either the will or the ability.

The withdrawal from Syria also benefits Russia, which flagrantly violated the ceasefire to which Trump and Putin personally agreed last year. Russia has a strong interest in supporting Assad's effort to reassert control over northeast Syria, where more than 90 percent of Syria's oil is located, as well its most productive agricultural land. The more self-reliant Assad becomes, the less Russia must invest in supporting him. The same is true of Assad and Iran.

Trump has often criticized his predecessor for a reckless and premature withdrawal from Iraq in 2011 that contributed directly to the rise of the Islamic State. He is now on the precipice of repeating that error in Syria. Trump initially announced the immediate departure of all U.S. forces, but administration officials soon extended the timeline, until Trump himself said that there is no date certain for the U.S. departure. Nonetheless, Trump insists his original decision has not changed. What this means in practice remains uncertain. ■



RECOMMENDATIONS | SYRIA

President Trump was right when he said in 2017, “Conditions on the ground — not arbitrary timetables” should be the basis for any withdrawal. “America’s enemies must never know our plans or believe they can wait us out,” he added.⁵² Any withdrawal now should also be conditions-based.

- 1 Prior to withdrawal, complete the training of local Kurdish and Arab forces so that they can finish the war against the Islamic State and prevent its resurgence.** The Pentagon projects a need for 40,000 trained fighters, of which it has trained 8,000.⁵³ The administration should also establish reliable processes for providing these fighters with the weapons, air support, and intelligence needed to defeat the Islamic State.
- 2 Prior to withdrawal, secure a commitment from Turkey not to attack the Syrian Kurds again.** Erdogan is reportedly resisting any constraints, but Washington should hold firm. In return, the U.S. should guarantee that the Syrian Kurds will not aid or assist the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), the Kurdish terrorist organization in Turkey.
- 3 Encourage the UK, France, and other allies to establish a long-term partnership with the Syrian Kurds.** In the absence of Western support, the Syrian Kurds will have to turn to Russia and Iran for protection from Turkey. The likely price for such protection will be granting Assad access to oil, gas, and other resources in northeast Syria, which would alleviate his dire financial situation.
- 4 Even if conditions allow a withdrawal from northeast Syria, maintain a contingent of Special Operations Forces at al-Tanf.** The base at al-Tanf sits astride the optimal route for Iran’s land bridge to the Mediterranean. The U.S. should also ensure that the UN can provide unimpeded humanitarian relief to the refugee camp at Rukban, a short distance from al-Tanf. Russia and Assad have often blocked this relief in order to destabilize the area and push out U.S. forces. A reliable flow of aid could prevent a grave humanitarian crisis while maintaining positive relations between U.S. forces and the Rukban population.
- 5 Maintain U.S. troops and bases in Iraq.** It is much less efficient to conduct operations against the Islamic State in Syria from bases in Iraq, yet still far preferable to conducting them from even further away. The president should ask the Pentagon to assess whether additional resources will be needed should the force in Iraq assume responsibility for operations in Syria.
- 6 Intensify the campaign of economic pressure against the Assad regime, thereby raising the cost to Iran and Russia of propping it up.** The Treasury Department should vigorously enforce sanctions that prohibit Iran from exporting oil to Syria via tanker. It should also investigate and sanction the new generation of businesspeople, like Samer Foz, as well as banks that help Damascus evade sanctions. Furthermore, Treasury should intensify targeting of those who direct or enable Assad’s human rights violations. The U.S. should also investigate, reform, and monitor the UN humanitarian aid process, which Assad manipulates to support his war effort. It should also pressure Arab partners to stop normalizing relations with Assad prior to a peace settlement.
- 7 Support Israeli efforts to degrade Iranian military infrastructure in Syria and prevent the transfer of advanced weapons to Hezbollah.** Employ U.S. intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets to support Israeli missions. Prepare to resupply Israeli munitions, if necessary. Communicate to Russia that it should refrain from interference in Israeli operations against Iranian targets. Consider additional support for Israeli missile defense efforts, such as increasing the rate of production for Iron Dome interceptors.
- 8 Communicate to Assad that there will be concrete and escalating costs for any use of chemical weapons.** If Assad employs them again, the U.S. should destroy his remaining air forces and air defenses.



وعدنا الصادق
Our Truthful Pledge

نظر
من
الله



HEZBOLLAH

Emanuele Ottolenghi and Tony Badran



ABOVE: Supporters wave portraits of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah during a “Victory over Israel” rally in Beirut’s suburbs on September 22, 2006 in Beirut, Lebanon. (Photo by Salah Malkawi/Getty Images)

RIGHT: Funeral of Hezbollah commander in Beirut. (Photo by Salah Malkawi/Getty Images)

CURRENT POLICY | HEZBOLLAH

The Trump administration has escalated the use of sanctions and criminal investigations to intensify the pressure on Hezbollah's global threat networks. This effort has prioritized financial warfare initiatives designed to disrupt the transnational illicit networks that raise and launder hundreds of millions of dollars for the terrorist group each year.

The administration has sought to separate this policy of pressure from its overall policy toward Lebanon, where Hezbollah reigns supreme. With the expressed position of safeguarding Lebanon's stability, the administration has continued its financial and political support to Lebanon's so-called "state institutions," namely the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF). In addition, the administration has tried, without success, to beef up the mandate of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) in an attempt to constrict Hezbollah activities in south Lebanon. However, despite its continued support, the administration has not asked the LAF and the Lebanese government to take meaningful action against Hezbollah, focusing instead on sanctions compliance and the banking sector. Since last December, Israel has uncovered six Hezbollah-built tunnels, crossing from Lebanon into Israeli territory⁵⁴ – a flagrant violation of UN Security Council Resolution 1701 and a gross failure on the part of the LAF and UNIFIL to fulfill their duties under the resolution. The Department of Defense announced in January 2019 that it was giving the LAF another \$100 million aid package regardless.⁵⁵

On the law enforcement front, an early and important achievement was the arrest in Morocco of Hezbollah financier Qassem Tajeddine in March 2017. Along with his brothers, Tajeddine ran numerous front companies for Hezbollah in Africa. After Tajeddine's extradition to the U.S., he pleaded guilty to evading sanctions.⁵⁶

Other key arrests drew on improved cooperation between the U.S. and foreign governments.⁵⁷ A pivotal case in point concerns the Tri-Border Area (TBA) of South America, where Paraguay, Argentina, and Brazil converge. Prior to the Trump presidency, Paraguayan authorities, with U.S. assistance, arrested a suspected Hezbollah drug trafficker in August 2016. In June 2017, they extradited him to the U.S. Subsequent U.S.-Paraguayan cooperation led to the arrest of two more

suspected Hezbollah financiers in May and June 2018 and their extradition to the U.S. in November 2018.⁵⁸

Most recently, U.S.-Argentinian cooperation led, in July 2018, to exposing a money-laundering scheme linked to Ahmad Assad Barakat, a key Hezbollah financier in the TBA whom Treasury sanctioned in 2004.⁵⁹ Brazilian authorities arrested Barakat in September.

The administration's renewed focus on Hezbollah was reflected in the Department of Justice's decision to create the Hezbollah Financing and Narcoterrorism Team (HFNT),⁶⁰ whose goal was to revive the Drug Enforcement Administration's successful Project Cassandra investigations, which the Obama administration derailed.⁶¹ In October 2018, then-Attorney General Jeff Sessions identified Hezbollah, along with four Central and South American cartels and gangs, as the "top transnational organized crime threats" to the U.S. today.⁶² Sessions specifically described Hezbollah as a "transnational criminal organization," an overdue recognition that crime has become just as integral to the group as terrorism.

The efforts of the Treasury Department have likewise intensified under the Trump administration. In 2018, the Treasury Department made over 30 Hezbollah-related sanctions designations, the most in a single year. Most of these designations targeted the network of Adham Tabaja, a Hezbollah financier who, alongside senior Hezbollah official Abdallah Safieddine, runs the group's criminal enterprise.⁶³ The designations focused in particular on Tabaja's network in Iraq, but also targeted his associates in Africa, Belgium, and Lebanon.⁶⁴

Other important initiatives at Treasury include coordinating with Persian Gulf allies through the creation of the Terrorist Financing Targeting Center in May 2017, which led to joint sanctions on Hezbollah. Treasury is also pressuring Lebanon's banking sector to improve its compliance with U.S. sanctions. ■



ASSESSMENT | HEZBOLLAH

The U.S. Justice and Treasury Departments' aggressive targeting of Hezbollah is a powerful tool for efforts to constrain and deter the global activities of one of the world's most dangerous terrorist groups. The Trump administration's decision to prioritize the use of law enforcement and sanctions against Hezbollah was an important policy initiative.

But a comprehensive anti-Hezbollah policy should go beyond law enforcement and sanctions to address Hezbollah's growing domination of Lebanon – the group's main base of political and military power, and the epicenter of its operations to threaten key U.S. allies and interests across the Middle East on behalf of its Iranian patrons.

The administration's concern for the stability of the Lebanese banking sector and overall economy also clashes with the reality of Hezbollah domination.

Much like its predecessor, the Trump administration has sought to avoid acknowledging Hezbollah's total control over Lebanon. Instead, it maintains that the best way to contest Hezbollah's influence is by strengthening Lebanese state institutions, especially the LAF. A 2017 White House notice affirmed the administration's commitment "to supporting legitimate state institutions in Lebanon and ... to expose Hizballah's nefarious behavior."⁶⁵

The fatal flaw of this approach is that state institutions are often complicit with Hezbollah and facilitate its activities. In May 2018, Hezbollah's political coalition won a majority in Parliament, which will give it control of the next government. As a result, Hezbollah will directly control lucrative ministries, like the Ministry of Public Health. In the past, Hezbollah has used this and other ministries, such as the Ministries of Social Affairs and Agriculture, to benefit affiliated organizations. For example, the government allocated \$2 million in grant money in 2017 from Western donor institutions to the Ministry of Social Affairs, which in turn awarded the money to various local organizations, including the Mahdi Scouts, Hezbollah's

youth organization.⁶⁶ The potential for Hezbollah's financial gain from the health sector should not be dismissed.

The administration's concern for the stability of the Lebanese banking sector and overall economy also clashes with the reality of Hezbollah domination. Treasury's October designation of Muhammad Abdallah al-Amin – a member of Adham Tabaja's Hezbollah finance network – is instructive in this regard. Al-Amin's designation shows he has held significant funds in his name in Lebanese banks on behalf of Tabaja. He also served as a liaison between Tabaja and banking officials.⁶⁷

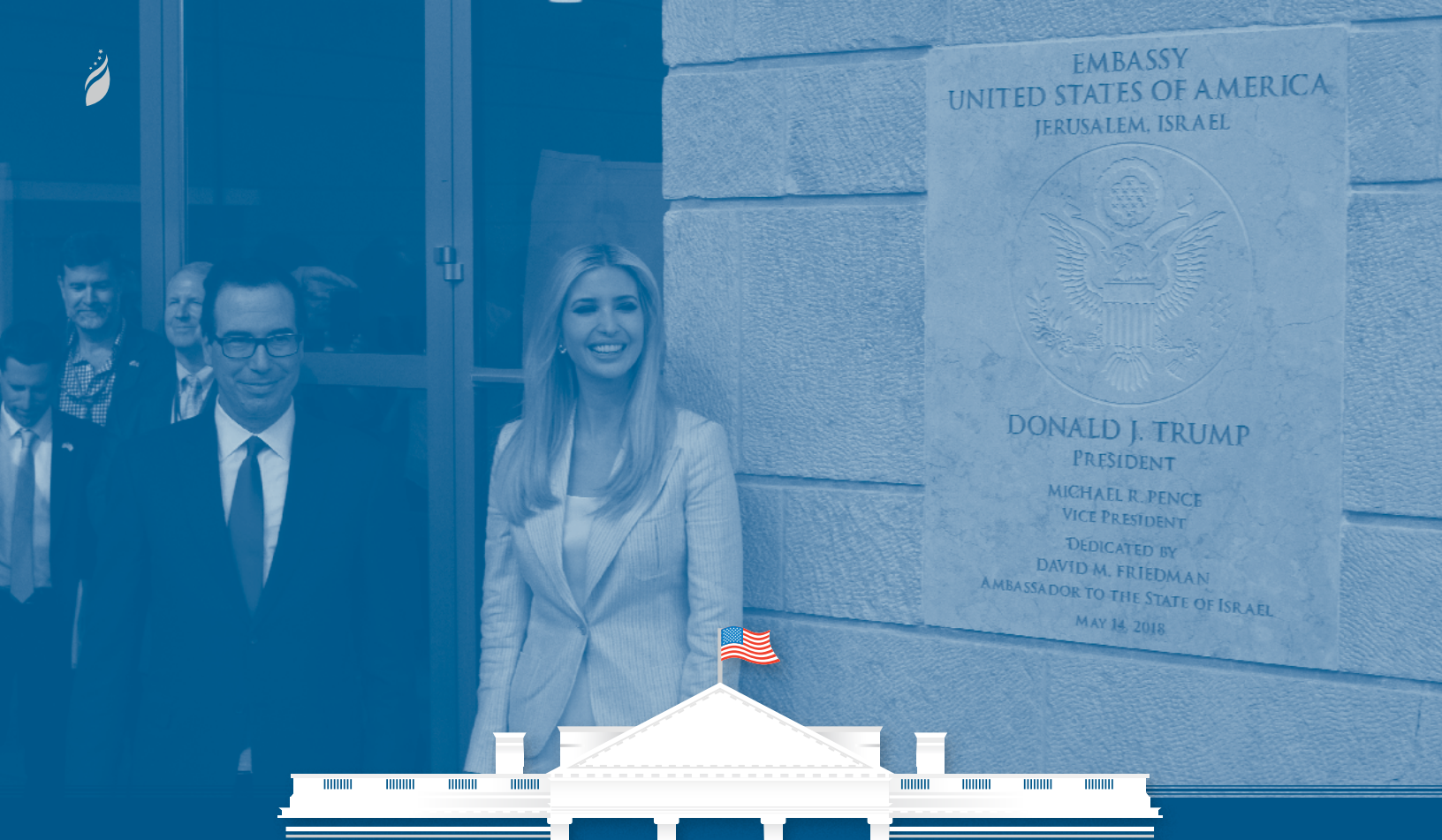
While it is likely that Lebanese banks will want to comply with Treasury's requirements, assessing their efficacy will be tricky, given the ubiquitous nature of Hezbollah's financial operations in Lebanon and the difficulty of determining the provenance of overseas remittances into the country. A case in point: Lebanese banks worked with al-Amin until his designation. Moreover, al-Amin's companies dealt in food, energy, merchandise distribution, and advertising, which underscored how entangled Hezbollah's finances are with the Lebanese economy. If the administration pulls punches for fear of destabilizing Lebanon's economy, Hezbollah will find workarounds.

In addition, while most of the administration condemned Hezbollah's tunnels, the condemnation was incomplete in that it failed to assign proper responsibility to the Lebanese government for this violation of UN Security Council Resolution 1701, often omitting to mention Lebanon altogether or doubling down on praise and commitment to the LAF. The Defense Department managed to do something worse with its announcement of a \$100 million aid package to the LAF, even as Israel's operation to uncover and neutralize the tunnels was still ongoing. In so doing, it only reinforced Beirut's conviction that, no matter their dereliction or even complicity in Hezbollah's actions, U.S. political and financial support will remain unshakable.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo declared last May that the administration "will track down Iranian operatives and their Hizballah proxies" and "crush them."⁶⁸ Meeting this goal will require far more than financial and law enforcement pressure. ■

RECOMMENDATIONS | HEZBOLLAH

- 1 **Support Israel's use of hard power against Hezbollah in Syria.** The U.S. should make clear it stands behind Israel to ensure the Russians do not complicate Israel's ability to prevent Iran from shipping advanced weapons to Hezbollah.
- 2 **Coordinate a joint strategy with Israel as it targets Hezbollah assets in Syria.** The U.S. and Israel should develop a joint approach to targeting Hezbollah military infrastructure and logistical routes in Syria. This could include, but not be limited to, sharing intelligence and targeting information.
- 3 **Condition aid to the LAF on prevention of weapons smuggling and illicit weapons manufacturing.** Recent media reports indicate intensified Iranian smuggling through Beirut International Airport of components to increase the accuracy of Hezbollah's missiles.⁶⁹ If the LAF remains unwilling or incapable of preventing such activity, even after receiving hundreds of millions of dollars from U.S. aid over the past decade, it is no longer a viable partner.
- 4 **Warn Lebanon it may become a target.** The U.S. should communicate to the Lebanese that it would back Israeli military action in Lebanon against, but not limited to, targets used to upgrade Hezbollah's capabilities.
- 5 **Enforce existing sanctions on Iranian airlines using Beirut International Airport to bring in weapons or military equipment.** The U.S. recently sanctioned Qeshm Fars Air, the Iranian cargo carrier implicated by recent media reports in the delivery of guidance systems to Beirut. Entities involved in procuring and selling aircraft – two old Boeing 747s – to the airline have not been identified or punished.
- 6 **Formalize Hezbollah's designation as a Transnational Criminal Organization (TCO).** Many governments, including in Africa and Latin America, are reluctant to treat Hezbollah and its local networks as a terrorist organization. A TCO designation would lead them to take the criminal threat from Hezbollah more seriously.
- 7 **Support the Department of Justice's newly established task forces to combat Hezbollah's terror finance.** The administration should invest significant resources in empowering its newly established HFNT and TCO Task Force. In particular, it should increase resources assigned to law enforcement agencies and intelligence gathering to enlarge the volume of cases the task forces are able to pursue and successfully prosecute.
- 8 **Leverage newly passed legislation to go after Hezbollah facilitators globally.** The Hizballah International Financing and Prevention Amendments Act of 2018 (HIFPAA) imposes mandatory sanctions on foreign persons who recruit and raise funds on behalf of the group. It also sanctions foreign states, agencies, and instrumentalities of a foreign state that support Hezbollah. HIFPAA thus opens the door for the administration to target Hezbollah fundraising activities overseas, even in countries that have not yet blacklisted the group, for example in Europe, Africa, and Latin America. The administration could also target Lebanese ministries and government agencies that fund Hezbollah-run organizations or projects, as well as an expanded range of Iranian actors. Finally, pressure and the threat of sanctions on Lebanese banks should continue. Such actions could severely destabilize Lebanon's economy, and are thus the strongest incentive for Lebanon's financial system to quarantine Hezbollah's financial operations.
- 9 **Leverage newly passed legislation to go after Hezbollah (and Iranian) use of human shields.** As shown by the recent discovery of Hezbollah-built tunnels under the Israel-Lebanon border, Hezbollah continues to hide its military infrastructure behind or under civilian infrastructure. The Sanctioning the Use of Civilians as Defenseless Shields Act requires the president to name those Hezbollah operatives and supporters involved in this activity. By demonstrating that Hezbollah and Iran deliberately and systematically place military assets in locations that ensure civilian casualties, the U.S. can discredit false claims that democratic governments, which oppose Hezbollah and Iran, are responsible for harm to civilians.⁷⁰



ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT

Jonathan Schanzer and David May



ABOVE: White House senior advisor Ivanka Trump and U.S. Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin arrive to the opening of the U.S. embassy in Jerusalem on May 14, 2018 in Jerusalem, Israel. (Photo by Lior Mizrahi/Getty Images)

RIGHT: President Mahmoud Abbas of the Palestinian Authority delivers a speech during a joint statement with U.S. President Donald Trump in the Roosevelt Room of the White House on May 3, 2017 in Washington, DC. (Photo by Olivier Douliery-Pool/Getty Images)

CURRENT POLICY | ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT

Defying concerns that the peace process is a lost cause, the Trump administration has spent more than a year promising to broker the “deal of the century” between Israelis and Palestinians. Meanwhile, the administration has aligned itself closely with Israel’s government by moving the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem and slashing American funding for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), the agency responsible for Palestinian refugees. Details of the administration’s peace plan remain a closely guarded secret, leaving uncertain how the White House intends to resolve a conflict that is increasingly resistant to foreign mediation.

By moving the embassy and cutting funding for refugees, President Trump has slaughtered the sacred cows of the peace process. For decades, candidates have pledged to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, yet fear of an Arab backlash had prevented any White House from following through. With his decision, Trump called the bluff of Palestinian negotiators and numerous experts who warned that such a move would set the region ablaze. The president added insult to injury by shuttering the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) mission in Washington, DC and downgrading the U.S. consulate in East Jerusalem to an extension of the Jerusalem embassy,⁷¹ thereby removing a symbol of American support for Palestinian claims to the city.

The administration has similarly dismantled the Palestinian refugee issue. UNRWA’s unique policy of granting refugee status to the descendants of refugees has increased the original population of less than 700,000 displaced Palestinians in 1949 to more than 5.4 million today. Previously UNRWA’s top donor accounting for a quarter of agency’s budget, the U.S. has pulled \$305 million in contributions and does not intend to renew its support. Palestinians again warned that such a move would set the region on tilt. Once again, Trump proved them wrong – at least for now.

The administration has also pushed back hard against efforts to delegitimize Israel at the UN. Notably, the White House exited UNESCO, the first UN body to grant full membership to the “State of Palestine.” The U.S. stopped funding the agency in 2011 after it admitted Palestine

as a member state but only ended formal ties in 2018, under the Trump administration. The administration has also exited the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC), whose members include China, Cuba, and other dictatorships, yet condemns Israel more often than all other nations combined.

Controversially, Trump has also withheld \$200 million of U.S. aid to projects in the West Bank and Gaza to pressure Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to reengage in the peace process.⁷² This came after Congress passed the Taylor Force Act, which cut aid to the Palestinian Authority (PA) until it ends payments to terrorists and their families. In response, Abbas and the PA have boycotted the administration, refusing to meet American officials. Congress then passed the Anti-Terrorism Clarification Act of 2018, which could threaten the remaining Palestinian security aid. These cuts raise real concerns about Washington’s ability to have influence with the Palestinians on key issues, like security cooperation with the Israelis.

The Trump administration’s broader strategy appears designed to break the Palestinians’ cycle of dependence on foreign support, which encourages corruption, thereby necessitating additional support. On that score, Trump advisor Jason Greenblatt has focused on growing the Palestinian economy to encourage self-sufficiency and perhaps stimulate investment in the peace process.⁷³ And the focus has not only been on the West Bank. In March 2018, the White House hosted a Gaza humanitarian relief conference, attended by 19 countries but boycotted by the Palestinians.⁷⁴ This was part of Trump’s efforts to enlist regional actors, such as Saudi Arabia, to encourage new thinking on Gaza, which is currently subject to an Israeli blockade because the terrorist group Hamas controls the coastal enclave. ■



ASSESSMENT | ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT

If the administration seeks a landmark agreement between Israelis and Palestinians, a very difficult road lies ahead. In light of his faltering health and influence, Abbas may not be able to implement a substantial agreement even if he were willing to sign it. Nor is it clear how an agreement could mitigate the threat posed by Hamas.

Sensibly, the administration has not divulged elements of its plan before it is ready, which has prevented extremists and spoilers from undermining a potential deal. Nonetheless, by raising expectations while postponing the plan's release, the administration has generated skepticism about both the contents of its plan as well its commitment to it.

Trump's readiness to depart from conventional thinking may be an asset. After all, 25 years of conventional thinking since Oslo have yielded little progress. White House aides vow that their plan will not entail another formulaic two-state solution.

In the short run, Trump's unorthodox decisions have antagonized the Palestinian Authority leadership, which has led to a full rupture in ties. The Palestinians have cast Trump's approach as punitive and have argued that the U.S. has thus disqualified itself as an honest broker. In the long run, however, Trump's confrontational moves may force the Palestinians to bend, especially if the Arab states apply pressure.

The relocation of the U.S. embassy clearly confounded forecasts that it would spark violence in the West Bank and the wider Arab world. (The Gaza "March of Return" in May was planned before the embassy move, though the decision may have exacerbated tensions.) Over time, the American embassy's presence in Jerusalem may clarify for Palestinians that the city will remain the Israeli capital for the foreseeable future.

Holding UNRWA accountable was also long overdue. The organization undermines prospects for compromise by exacerbating a refugee crisis that, logically speaking, should no longer exist. UNRWA schools also have a long record of promoting the demonization of Israel. But the removal of services could spark unrest in refugee camps. If UNRWA is ultimately dissolved, other service providers will be necessary.

The decision to challenge UN efforts to delegitimize Israel also represents a welcome reversal of the Obama administration's passive approach to the problem, or even its complicity, as was the case in the passage of UN Security Council Resolution 2334.

The decision to challenge UN efforts to delegitimize Israel also represents a welcome reversal of the Obama administration's passive approach to the problem, or even its complicity, as was the case in the passage of UN Security Council Resolution 2334, which cast Israel as the main despoiler of peace while remaining silent on Palestinian support for terrorism.

On the other hand, cuts in funding to the PA may prove to be the administration's main mistake on the Israeli-Palestinian front, inasmuch as they impede security cooperation. Should that cooperation break down, terrorist activity in the West Bank may become difficult to contain, thereby imperiling a new peace deal. ■

RECOMMENDATIONS | ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT

- 1 Wait to unveil the peace plan until after Israel's April elections.** The Trump administration should not hastily release its plan, particularly in light of upcoming Israeli elections. Israel's next prime minister will need to construct a political coalition more inclined toward compromise over territory in the West Bank if its goal is to maintain strong ties with the Trump administration. Moreover, unfurling an ill-conceived plan would create further distrust among the parties and erode confidence in the United States as a broker.
- 2 Keep in mind the structural barriers to peace.** Palestinians are divided between Gaza and the West Bank, and between Hamas and Fatah. As long as this schism persists, the PA cannot enforce and guarantee Palestinian adherence to a peace deal.
- 3 Prepare for a chaotic Palestinian succession.** Mahmoud Abbas has overstayed his mandate by nearly a decade. He is in his mid-80s and is reportedly in poor health. For peace to succeed and endure, Israel must reach an agreement with viable Palestinian institutions, not a lone figure. Yet the PA has become a vehicle for Abbas' autocratic rule. He has prevented the emergence of a clear successor.
- 4 Build the economy first.** The Trump administration should lay the groundwork for a peace deal by improving the Palestinians' ability to provide for their own needs. The White House should support coexistence, entrepreneurship, and infrastructure projects, particularly in the West Bank. This can pave the way for Palestinian buy-in to a future peace process, if they realize that cooperation is the way to overcome deprivation. The U.S. should pursue such initiatives through transparent non-government organizations to sidestep the rampant corruption within the PA.
- 5 Redefine the refugee problem.** Trump should order the State Department to release its report estimating the total number of 1948-49 Palestinian refugees still alive (the number is estimated to be less than 40,000). This will allow all sides to plan for a realistic solution to the problem. Concurrently, the U.S. should support some refugee assistance programs to ensure medical, educational, and nutritional needs are met among the destitute populations UNRWA serves. This would also avoid destabilizing nearby countries, such as Jordan, that host numerous Palestinian refugees.
- 6 Keep fighting for UN reform.** The UN is exceptionally resistant to change. U.S. ambassadors to the UN will have to pick up where Nikki Haley left off, exerting constant pressure to ensure that the organization gradually moves in the right direction. Reforms to the UNHRC should include the removal of Agenda Item Seven, which ensures the targeting of Israel at every session. The U.S. should also hold accountable any UN body that advances the PA's "Palestine 194" campaign to secure statehood without negotiating peace or recognizing Israel.
- 7 Preserve security assistance.** Aid cuts to the PA must not harm Israeli-Palestinian security cooperation.
- 8 Demonstrate strategic vision.** Trump must provide carrots, in addition to the sticks, to demonstrate that he is serious about improving Palestinian lives and establishing a path to statehood.
- 9 Encourage regional support.** Trump's peace push comes amid a changing regional order. Fear of Iranian aggression and respect for Israeli capabilities have drawn Sunni Arab states closer to Israel. Trump should leverage this to enlist regional partners in the cause of peace.



EGYPT

Jonathan Schanzer and Romany Shaker



ABOVE: Two Egyptian soldiers during Exercise Bright Star 2018.
(U.S. Air Force photo by Staff Sgt. Justin Warren)

RIGHT: U.S. President Donald Trump and Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi on April 3, 2017 at the White House.
(Photo by Olivier Douliery-Pool/Getty Images)

CURRENT POLICY | EGYPT

The Trump administration has adopted a policy of restoring America's strategic partnership with Egypt after five tense years under the previous administration, which did not support the 2013 military coup that toppled the Muslim Brotherhood-led government of President Mohammed Morsi. Under President Trump, security cooperation is once again the cornerstone of bilateral ties, with an emphasis on countering Islamist militant groups and addressing common regional security challenges. The administration has clearly deemphasized human rights and democratic governance in what some critics charge is a shortsighted abandonment of American values.

Trump has so far met five times with his counterpart, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, and their personal relationship appears warm. Sisi's official visit to the White House in April 2017 was the clearest sign that the administration sought to reverse the policies of Barack Obama, who never invited the Egyptian president to Washington. The administration has pledged support to Egypt's ongoing fight against terrorism as well as its economic reform program, while raising only intermittent concerns about its disregard for the rule of law and civil liberties.⁷⁵

Egypt is consistently the second largest recipient of U.S. assistance.⁷⁶ Nevertheless, in August 2017, Washington denied Cairo almost \$100 million in aid and held back another \$195 million of military assistance.⁷⁷ The surprise decision reflected U.S. concerns about both worsening repression at home and the Egyptian military's persistent ties to North Korea. Egypt quickly announced it was cutting military ties to Pyongyang⁷⁸ and, in response, the Trump administration in 2018 fully restored military aid, even though Egypt's human rights situation continued to deteriorate.⁷⁹

In his notification to Congress restoring full assistance, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo did include a lengthy and blunt description of the human rights climate in

Egypt. He cited "a continuing problem with arbitrary arrests and detentions and forced disappearances, and numerous allegations of torture and death in detention." Furthermore, he noted that non-government organizations (NGOs) have become the targets of harsh new regulations, while state-controlled media propagate conspiracy theories "to vilify NGOs receiving foreign assistance, including U.S. assistance."⁸⁰

Nevertheless, the Trump administration's security cooperation with Cairo has continued apace. Washington's January 2018 designation of the Egyptian-based HASM and Liwa al-Thawra as terrorist organizations was an indicator of U.S. support for Sisi's campaign to challenge violent groups associated with the Muslim Brotherhood.⁸¹ Trump also restarted a biennial joint military exercise called Bright Star, which Obama suspended in 2013 after Egyptian security forces killed as many as 1,000 protesters in a single day.⁸² The Trump administration has, in addition, relied on Egypt to assist in its efforts to revive Israeli-Palestinian peace talks and avert another war in Gaza. ■



ASSESSMENT | EGYPT

The Trump administration has promoted U.S. security interests by restoring America's strategic partnership with Egypt. However, it has largely overlooked the Sisi regime's crackdown on human rights and civil society. Furthermore, security cooperation appears to have only marginally improved Egypt's competence in battling the Islamic State branch in Sinai. It has also not prevented Cairo from deepening its military ties to Moscow.

Sisi's record on human rights and democracy remains abysmal despite recent positive steps to release imprisoned political activists and review the law curbing NGOs.⁸³ The State Department's latest human rights report detailed numerous problems, including restrictions on freedom of expression, torture, government control over NGOs, and trials of civilians by military courts. Tens of thousands of non-violent activists have been incarcerated. In addition, the State Department's religious freedom report cited attacks on Christians, and lack of recognition for Bahais, Mormons, and Jehovah's Witnesses. Egypt also mistreats ex-Muslims, including atheists or converts to other faiths, while restricting Shiites from performing religious rituals publicly.⁸⁴ Finally, a new constitutional amendment could allow Sisi to extend his rule beyond the currently mandated eight years, which will end in 2022.⁸⁵

To its credit, the Trump administration successfully negotiated the release of Aya Hijazi, an Egyptian-American aid worker, and U.S. citizen Ahmed Etiwy, who were wrongfully imprisoned. Nonetheless, 20 Americans reportedly remain jailed in Egypt.⁸⁶ Trump has also pressed Sisi for better treatment of Coptic Christians, while Vice President Mike Pence voiced concerns about the arrest of non-violent activists.⁸⁷

Admittedly, prioritizing the strategic relationship has yielded measurable benefits. Restricting Cairo's military relationship with North Korea was an important achievement. Encouraging increased Egyptian engagement on Gaza has helped Israel manage the explosive situation there, including efforts by Cairo to hinder Hamas' ability to smuggle money, weapons, and goods.⁸⁸ U.S. support for IMF-backed economic reforms has helped stabilize Egypt's macro-economic situation – though Cairo struggles to create jobs, attract private investment, and alleviate the hardships faced by Egypt's rapidly growing population.

However, Egypt's military campaign against the Islamic State in Sinai has had a limited impact. In 2017, the Islamic State carried out a series of bombings on Christian targets, as well as murdering more than 300 Sufis in the deadliest terror attack in Egypt's modern history. Sisi responded by launching the "Sinai 2018" military campaign, which has halted high-profile attacks, although the Islamic State massacred seven Christians in central Egypt in November.⁸⁹ In December, a roadside bomb attack on a tour bus in Giza killed three Vietnamese tourists and an Egyptian tour guide, the first incident targeting foreign tourists in Egypt in a year. The government, meanwhile, has failed to address some of the underlying causes of extremism: local political and economic grievances, reforming education curricula, and countering Islamist narratives.

The overarching challenge for U.S.-Egypt relations remains the same as it has been for 40 years: preserving a strategic partnership with a crucial regional state without turning a blind eye to human rights abuses that not only violate American values, but ultimately increase the likelihood of domestic instability.

Worryingly, military cooperation between Egypt and Russia has expanded, including a preliminary five-year agreement for the joint use of each other's air space and airbases. The two have also conducted joint exercises in both Russia and Egypt, and have consulted closely on the conflict in Libya. On the economic front, bilateral trade is growing, including in Egypt's energy sector. Cairo and Moscow signed a 50-year deal for a Russian Industrial Zone within the Suez Canal Economic Zone. Russia also continues to build Egypt's first nuclear power plant, made possible by \$25 billion of Russian financing.⁹⁰ This indicates U.S. influence may be waning.

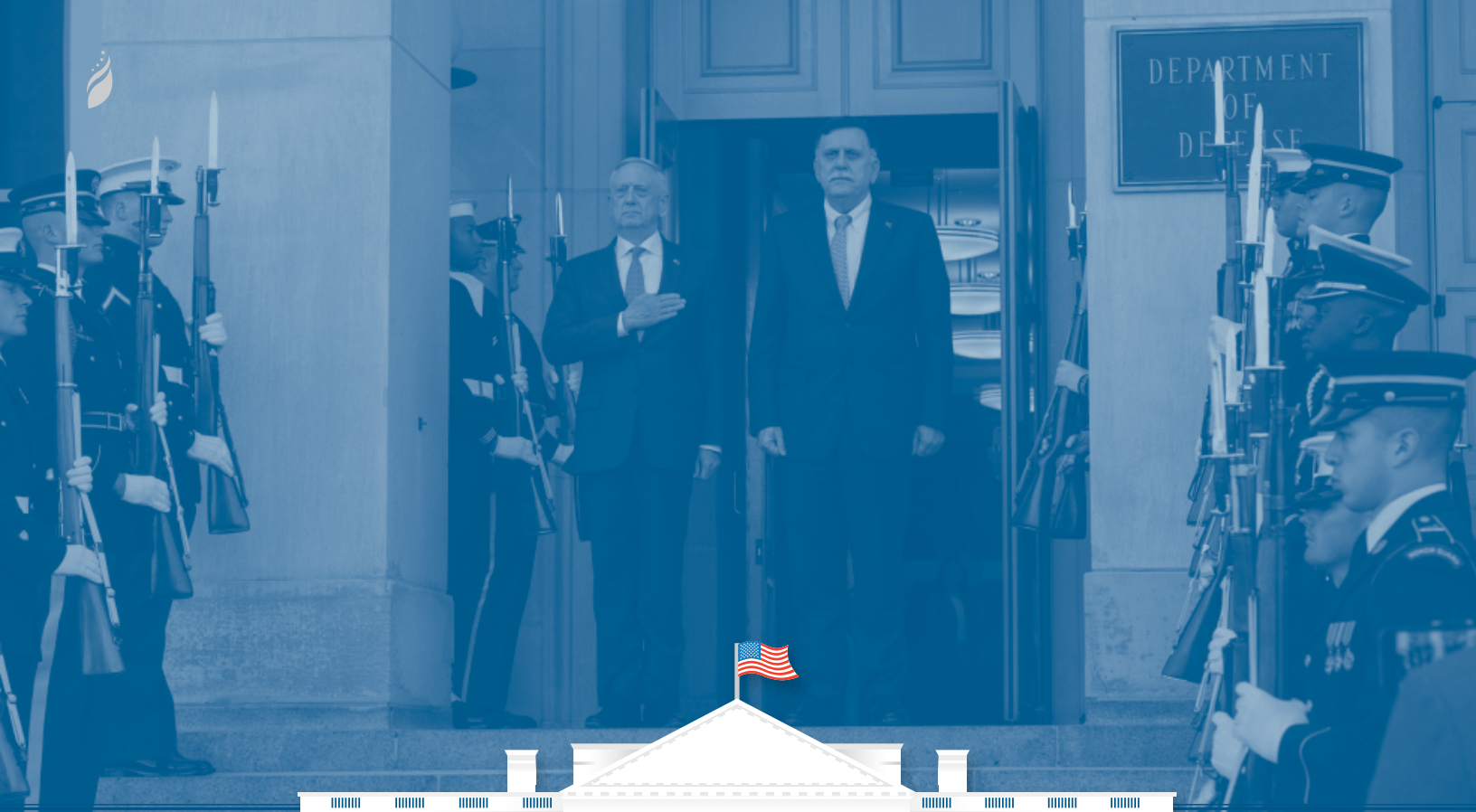
The overarching challenge for U.S.-Egypt relations remains the same as it has been for 40 years: preserving a strategic partnership with a crucial regional state without turning a blind eye to human rights abuses that not only violate American values, but ultimately increase the likelihood of domestic instability. ■

RECOMMENDATIONS | EGYPT

- 1 Balance the current emphasis on strategic cooperation with greater concern for human rights and democracy.** The Trump administration should engage Egyptian officials in regular dialogue over human rights. If necessary, it should employ conditionality on foreign assistance to address serious concerns, a tactic that has proven effective.
- 2 Promote religious freedom and monitor abuses targeting minorities, especially Christians who remain vulnerable to attacks.** The administration should encourage educational and religious reforms through cooperation with educational institutions and universities. It should also counter anti-Semitic and anti-American campaigns in Egypt by exposing the perpetrators and challenging Cairo to reform the educational system.
- 3 Appoint an American ambassador to Egypt.** Cairo has been without a U.S. ambassador for over a year. A new ambassador would enable Washington to strengthen engagement with Egypt across the board.
- 4 Continue sanctioning Egyptian organizations that meet the criteria for terrorism, including Muslim Brotherhood-tied groups.** The Trump administration should communicate a clear message that the Brotherhood remains a breeding ground for extremism. This is sound policy for America's war against terrorism, and also serves to support Cairo in its battle against domestic terror groups.
- 5 Call for economic reforms.** The administration should encourage Cairo to create more space for the private sector and minimize the role of the state and its armed forces in the economy.
- 6 Encourage Egyptian efforts to push Palestinian leaders to reduce tensions and work with Israel.** As Israel's southern neighbor that also shares a border with Gaza, Egypt harbors significant influence with Israeli and Palestinian leaders alike. The United States should work to ensure that Cairo plays a constructive role in reducing tensions between them.



U.S. President Donald Trump speaks as Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi sits on the opposite side of the table with their respective delegations in the Cabinet Room of White House on April 3, 2017. (Photo by Olivier Douliery-Pool/Getty Images)



DEPARTMENT
OF
DEFENSE



LIBYA

Romany Shaker and Tzvi Kahn



ABOVE: Secretary of Defense James N. Mattis hosts Libyan Prime Minister Fayez al-Serraj during a visit at the Pentagon on November 30, 2017. (U.S. Army photo by Darrell Hudson)

RIGHT: A Libyan rebel on March 9, 2011 near Ras Lanuf, Libya. (Photo by John Moore/Getty Images)

CURRENT POLICY | LIBYA

The Trump administration, like its predecessor, has largely disengaged from political reconciliation efforts aimed at unifying Libya's rival governments in the east and west. Instead, it has relied on the United Nations and Europe to manage the country's political divisions and persistent instability. The United States has played a more active role in military operations against the Islamic State and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), but engagement has remained limited even on these fronts.

Seven years after the fall of the Muammar al-Qadhafi regime, Libya remains mired in armed clashes, political discord, and economic crisis. The Tripoli-based government of Fayeze al-Sarraj, known as the Government of National Accord (GNA), continues to compete for influence with the eastern-based government backed by the House of Representatives (HoR), which has aligned itself with General Khalifa Haftar's Libya National Army (LNA). The GNA, which Washington and the UN recognize as Libya's only legitimate government, emerged in December 2015 as a product of the UN-brokered Libyan Political Agreement, which tasked the GNA with building a democratic state rooted in national consensus.

The United Nations, France, and Italy have taken the lead in resolving the Libyan crisis. The UN Action Plan seeks to facilitate approval of a new constitution and hold an inclusive national conference in early 2019, followed by new elections in the spring. The Action Plan also addresses humanitarian assistance and the need for economic and security reforms. France and Italy, though, have sparred over the future of Libya's leadership, undercutting the UN plan. Paris, which chiefly fears that Libya's instability exacerbates the risk of terrorist attacks on European soil, backs the HoR and LNA, which prioritize the defeat of Islamist terror groups. Rome, which has prioritized stemming the flow of migrants and preserving its robust economic ties with Tripoli, supports the GNA yet has recently shown willingness to engage with Haftar.

President Trump indicated his relative disinterest in Libya when he said in April 2017, "I do not see a role in Libya" for America aside from "getting rid of ISIS."⁹¹ U.S. military leaders, however, have expressed greater concern. "The instability in Libya and North Africa may be the most significant, near-term threat to U.S. and allies' interests on the continent," said AFRICOM Commander

General Thomas D. Waldhauser in September 2017. Political divisions, he noted, "exacerbate the security situation, spilling into Tunisia and Egypt and the broader Maghreb, allowing the movement of foreign fighters, enabling the flow of migrants out of Libya to Europe and elsewhere."⁹² In March 2018, Waldhauser articulated four U.S. goals in Libya: "degrade terrorist groups who threaten U.S. interests and threaten to destabilize Libya and the region; avert civil war; support the political reconciliation process towards a unified central government; and assist to curb the flow of illegal migrants into Europe via Libya."⁹³

Even so, the Trump administration has offered little in the way of diplomatic engagement aside from limited economic assistance aimed at bolstering the GNA and Libyan civil society. To date, the U.S. embassy remains closed and there is no U.S. ambassador; the Libya External Office at the U.S. embassy in Tunisia serves instead as the primary base for U.S. diplomats engaging with Libya.

Following an aggressive air campaign in 2016 that contributed to the collapse of the Islamic State stronghold of Sirte on the Libyan coast, U.S. military activity has sharply diminished. As part of counterterrorist operations, the U.S. military conducted eight airstrikes against the Islamic State in Libya in 2017 and six airstrikes in 2018, targeting both the Islamic State and AQIM.⁹⁴ The pace of activity may increase in 2019 if the Islamic State and AQIM take advantage of the country's continuing instability to recover their strength. ■



ASSESSMENT | LIBYA

The Trump administration's actions in Libya seem to rest on the assumption that the UN, France, and Italy can address the country's instability while U.S. counterterrorism operations can address direct threats. Yet the UN and the Europeans have not moved Libya much closer to creating a unified government with a legitimate military and security force. The prospects for achieving that goal would significantly improve through robust U.S. engagement.

In the absence of U.S. engagement, other countries are filling the void. Russia, seeking to burnish its credentials as a regional power, has worked to serve as a power broker between east and west Libya. In particular, Moscow has thrown its weight behind General Haftar and the LNA to safeguard its economic engagement with Libya in energy and infrastructure. France, Egypt, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia have also backed Haftar, who casts himself as a bulwark against terrorists and Islamists.

The Trump administration's actions in Libya seem to rest on the assumption that the UN, France, and Italy can address the country's instability while U.S. counterterrorism operations can address direct threats. Yet the UN and the Europeans have not moved Libya much closer to creating a unified government with a legitimate military and security force.

Libya has also suffered from destructive interventions by Turkey and Qatar, which seek a more Islamist order. In recent years, Turkey has repeatedly shipped arms to Libyan Islamist groups.⁹⁵ Likewise, Qatar has shuttled Islamist militants to Libya.⁹⁶ By contrast, Egypt, Algeria, and Tunisia have supported the UN Action Plan and rejected all foreign interference, although Cairo's support for Haftar is not consistent with this position despite its roots in legitimate security concerns. Chad, Niger, and Sudan also signed an agreement with Libya's

internationally recognized government to enhance cross border security by targeting human trafficking and arms and narcotics smuggling.⁹⁷ The deal, however, lacks formal international recognition.

In the areas where the United States has exerted greater effort, it has enjoyed some tactical success. In September 2017, U.S. forces captured Mustafa al-Imam, a member of the Islamist terrorist group Ansar al-Sharia, who helped plot the 2012 attack on the U.S. diplomatic compound in Benghazi, killing Ambassador Christopher Stevens and three others.⁹⁸ Likewise, U.S. airstrikes on the Islamic State and AQIM have degraded the abilities of both terrorist groups, according to AFRICOM.⁹⁹

Nonetheless, the Islamic State is still capable of carrying out attacks against state, military, and economic targets. The group has claimed responsibility for several major operations, including a December suicide attack on Libya's foreign ministry in Tripoli, a September shooting at the Tripoli headquarters of National Oil Corporation, and a May attack on High National Election Commission. The Islamic State also has acknowledged that it perpetrated surprise attacks on the central town of al-Fuqaha and the southern town of Tazirbu in October and November, respectively.

The United States has also employed sanctions to target those responsible for disrupting oil exports, a major source of income for the GNA. In February 2018, the Treasury Department sanctioned six individuals, 24 entities, and seven vessels for destabilizing Libya by engaging in illegal oil transactions. Washington and the UN jointly sanctioned Libyan militia leader Ibrahim Jadran for carrying out attacks on oil facilities. They also jointly designated Libyan militia leader Salah Badi for undermining security by directing attacks on groups aligned with the GNA. While it is difficult to show a direct causal relationship between these actions and rising oil production, the country's output recently jumped to almost 1.3 million barrels per day, the highest since 2013, according to the state-run National Oil Corporation.¹⁰⁰ In December, however, militia forces, tribesmen, and state guards seized the country's largest oilfield, El Sharara, disrupting its production of 315,000 barrels per day. ■

RECOMMENDATIONS | LIBYA

The Trump administration should recognize that it cannot achieve its strategic objectives in Libya by relying on others to resolve the country's political divisions. Moving forward, U.S. policy should adopt a holistic approach that engages all relevant stakeholders to achieve a unified, democratic Libya. As then-U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley said in a January 2018 Security Council meeting on Libya, "The only legitimate path to power is through free and fair elections."¹⁰¹

- 1 Directly engage with Libyan stakeholders to advance implementation of the UN Action Plan.** The Trump administration should urge Libya's rival governments to work together to prepare for free, credible, and secure elections in order to bring an end to interim governments and reunify state institutions. It should expand America's good governance programs and electoral support initiatives, and back comprehensive economic reforms based on the conclusions of Italy's Palermo conference.¹⁰²
- 2 Nominate a U.S. ambassador to Libya and, when security permits, reopen the U.S. embassy in Tripoli.** Washington needs a senior representative appointed by the president to engage effectively with Libyan and European leaders.
- 3 Avoid taking sides in the Italian-French rivalry over Libya.** Instead, the administration should work to create a unified international stance by recognizing the legitimate concerns of both countries and of the European Union.
- 4 Carefully monitor Russian, Turkish, and Qatari intervention in Libya.** The United States should be wary of Russian efforts to establish a permanent military presence in Libya. It should hold Turkey and Qatar accountable, potentially via sanctions, if they continue to provide arms and manpower to Islamist militias. Likewise, it should continue to monitor and sanction, in coordination with the UN, individuals or entities responsible for undermining the UN-led political process, endangering the lives of innocent civilians, squandering the country's resources, and engaging in migrant smuggling and human trafficking.
- 5 Continue the U.S. military counterterrorist campaign in coordination with the GNA, and provide training and advisory support to Libya to prevent the resurgence of the Islamic State and AQIM.** In the absence of an effective central authority, terrorists have ample opportunity to rebuild their strength.
- 6 Recognize the border agreement signed between Libya, Chad, Sudan, and Niger, as recommended by UN special envoy Ghassan Salamé.**¹⁰³ This step would help prevent foreign-armed groups from exploiting Libyan territory.



A five-inch lightweight gun fires Mark 91 illumination rounds aboard the Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer USS Carney, illuminating the shoreline of Sirte, Libya. (U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Weston Jones/Released)



IRAQ

John Hannah



ABOVE: U.S. Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo with Iraqi President Barham Salih on January 9, 2019 in Baghdad, Iraq. (U.S. State Department Photo/Flickr)

RIGHT: A Popular Mobilization Force (PMF) fighter looks through binoculars on the Iraq-Syria border on June 20, 2017. (Martyn Aim/Getty Images)

CURRENT POLICY | IRAQ

In Iraq, the Trump administration confronted much the same strategic challenge as its two predecessors: how to support the establishment of a stable, independent Iraq under constant threat from both Sunni jihadism and Iranian imperialism. Entering office with the war against the Islamic State still raging, the administration devoted its first year to eliminating the caliphate's strongholds in Iraq. But as the war wound down, the focus turned to the more difficult long-term problem of combating Iranian efforts to dominate Iraq's fledgling democracy.

During the 2016 presidential campaign, Donald Trump made crushing the Islamic State his top national security priority.¹⁰⁴ While Trump largely continued the Obama administration's strategy of using U.S. air power and several thousand troops to support local ground forces, he significantly loosened the rules of engagement.¹⁰⁵ The number of U.S. air strikes increased dramatically under Trump and likely hastened the Islamic State's collapse. By December 2017, the caliphate in Iraq (if not the Islamic State itself) had been vanquished.

In addition to military support, the administration also took steps to support Iraq politically and economically. Trump dropped Iraq from the countries originally included in his controversial travel ban.¹⁰⁶ Iraq's then-prime minister, Haider al-Abadi, was one of the first Arab leaders invited to the White House. The administration successfully pushed Saudi Arabia to increase diplomatic and economic engagement with Iraq, an objective its predecessors had failed to achieve.¹⁰⁷ After the Islamic State's defeat, the administration helped mobilize an international conference to support Iraq's reconstruction, netting \$30 billion in pledges.¹⁰⁸

While the war against the Islamic State continued, the administration's response toward Iran's growing influence in Iraq was muted. The intervention of the Quds Force, the external operations arm of Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), had proved crucial to Iraq's defense after its army collapsed in the face of the Islamic State's 2014 invasion.¹⁰⁹ Months before U.S. support was forthcoming, the Quds Force rushed weapons and commanders to Iraq. Several Quds Force-directed Iraqi militias sent thousands of Shiite fighters into the breach to prevent Iraq from

being overrun. These militias quickly came to dominate the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMFs), a contingent of more than 100,000 volunteers called to arms by Iraq's most influential cleric, Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani.

The Trump administration largely maintained a single-minded focus on defeating the Islamic State – even as Iran's proxies gained political and military strength. Most controversially, a few weeks after Iraq's Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) held an independence referendum in September 2017, the U.S. stood aside as the Iraqi military and IRGC-backed militias attacked Kurdish forces that for decades had been America's most reliable security partners in Iraq, seizing nearly half the territory and oil resources previously under KRG control.¹¹⁰

Despite U.S. efforts to bolster Abadi in the run-up to national elections in May 2018, his list finished behind two others with deep anti-American pedigrees and links to Iran – one headed by the firebrand cleric Muqtada al-Sadr and the other by the IRGC's PMF proxies. After the vote, Iraqis engaged in nearly five months of backroom haggling to form a governing coalition. American diplomats competed with Iran to shape the outcome, pushing hard to secure Abadi a second term.¹¹¹ But after violent protests erupted in the oil-rich Shiite province of Basra over deplorable economic conditions, Sistani called for a new face to serve as prime minister. By October, a compromise was reached to name the Kurdish politician, Barham Salih, as Iraq's new president and the Western-trained economist, Adel Abdul Mahdi, as prime minister.¹¹² Though the U.S. role in their selection

appeared marginal, both Salih and Mahdi had long worked closely with Washington while also maintaining cordial relations with Iran. ■



ASSESSMENT | IRAQ

The administration’s success in rapidly destroying the Islamic State caliphate was a clear achievement. With Iraqi forces bearing the brunt of the fighting, U.S. strategy succeeded in significantly reducing a major terrorist threat at a relatively low cost.

Beyond the military realm, the administration’s success in getting Saudi Arabia to make a sustained effort to engage Iraq politically and economically deserves credit. Deepening Iraq’s ties to the Arab world has long been viewed as an essential element of countering its dependence on Iran.

With its singular focus on the Islamic State, the U.S. did little to push back as the IRGC systematically worked to apply a variation of its ‘Hezbollah model’ in Iraq – wherein local proxies beholden to Iran establish themselves as the state’s most powerful military and political actors.

The greatest shortcoming in the administration’s policy was its lackluster response to the rising power of Iranian-backed militias. With its singular focus on the Islamic State, the U.S. did little to push back as

the IRGC systematically worked to apply a variation of its “Hezbollah model” in Iraq – wherein local proxies beholden to Iran establish themselves as the state’s most powerful military and political actors. The lack of U.S. protest as Iraqi militias fought in Syria on behalf of the Quds Force was telling. So, too, was U.S. silence as the Iraqi government, under substantial Iranian pressure, moved to legalize the PMFs as a quasi-independent force within Iraq’s security forces.¹¹³ Perhaps worst was the absence of serious U.S. efforts to avert Iraq’s post-referendum attack on America’s Kurdish allies, in which the IRGC’s proxies played a leading role.

The U.S. position appeared to stiffen after Trump’s decision in May 2018 to abandon the Iran nuclear deal. Shortly thereafter, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo set out 12 demands for Iran to change its behavior, including the specific requirement that “Iran must respect the sovereignty of the Iraqi government and permit the disarming, demobilization, and reintegration of Iraqi militias.”¹¹⁴ In September, after Iraqi militias fired rockets at U.S. diplomatic facilities in Baghdad and Basra, Pompeo explicitly blamed the Quds Force and warned that the U.S. would “go to the source” and hold Iran itself accountable for the actions of its proxies.¹¹⁵ But that message was muddled days later when additional rocket salvos in Basra triggered not U.S. retaliation against Iran, but a decision to evacuate U.S. diplomats.¹¹⁶ ■



Supporters of Iraqi Kurdistan independence referendum. (Photo by Chris McGrath/Getty Images)

RECOMMENDATIONS | IRAQ

- 1 Affirm U.S. military presence.** Trump's sudden announcement on December 19, 2018 that all U.S. troops would be withdrawn from Syria cast serious doubt on the future of America's military presence in Iraq. One week later, the president visited Iraq and suggested that U.S. forces there could be used to fight Islamic State remnants in Syria.¹¹⁷ With a new Iraqi government in place, headed by leaders supportive of strong relations with Washington, Trump should put to rest any remaining questions by officially affirming his intention to maintain a residual deployment of troops in Iraq as part of a long-term commitment to strengthen the Iraqi security forces. The U.S. presence plays a critical stabilizing role, bolstering Iraq's ability to combat still-lethal pockets of Islamic State terrorists, but even more importantly helping to counterbalance expanding Iranian influence.
- 2 Prioritize Iraq more.** The administration should visibly elevate Iraq's overall importance in U.S. policy – especially in light of its priority of constraining Iran's regional aggression. Mahdi and Salih will need constant U.S. coaxing to improve governance, fight corruption, and resist Iranian meddling, including via the PMFs. Iraqis have regularly complained that no senior official with regular access to Trump appears to “own” the administration's Iraq policy. Pompeo would be the obvious candidate. The administration should prioritize an early visit to Washington by Mahdi, following up on the invitation Trump extended to the Iraqi prime minister during his December 2018 trip to Iraq.
- 3 Help Iraq's post-war recovery.** After the Islamic State war, Iraq's reconstruction needs are huge. Many Sunni areas have been devastated. Southern Shiite provinces remain mired in poverty. Absent early progress on jobs and basic services, the dangers are great not only of an Islamic State resurgence, but of a broader collapse of faith in Iraq's democratic experiment. Even in an era of declining foreign assistance, the administration should consider ways to leverage a sustained commitment of U.S. aid to mobilize American businesses and like-minded countries behind a coordinated effort to support Iraq's recovery.
- 4 Constrain Iranian imperialism.** The administration needs a comprehensive strategy for blocking Iran's efforts to use Iraq as a platform for advancing its hegemonic ambitions. First and foremost, that means sustained political, economic, and security support to strengthen Iraq's own capabilities to stand up to Iranian meddling. But Iraq's ability to resist Iranian pressure will also depend on America's own resolve to confront Iranian aggression. The administration should be prepared to follow through on Pompeo's threat to hold Iran itself accountable for attacks on U.S. interests by its Iraqi proxies. In consultation with Iraq, the administration should also be prepared to designate the full array of Iraqi militias, agents, and front companies acting to facilitate Iran's malign activities. In light of Iraq's continued dependence on gas and electricity imports from Iran, the U.S. should work to help Baghdad reduce these vulnerabilities while insisting that Iraq not become a channel for major Iranian sanctions busting.
- 5 Rebuild relations with the KRG.** The administration should devote high-level attention to repairing the breach that occurred after the Kurdish referendum. The Kurds have far and away been America's most reliable partners in Iraq, not only on security and intelligence matters, but in trying to influence the politics and policies of Baghdad as well. The administration should invite KRG leaders to Washington, re-energize U.S.-KRG security cooperation, and support KRG internal reform to address corruption, economic mismanagement, and political dysfunction. The U.S. should also work energetically to mitigate conflicts between the KRG and Baghdad over key issues like oil, revenue sharing, and disputed territories, and ensure that the Kurds' legitimate interests are respected within Iraq's federal system.



SAUDI ARABIA

John Hannah and Varsha Koduvayur



ABOVE: U.S. President Donald Trump holds up a chart of military hardware sales as he meets with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in the Oval Office at the White House on March 20, 2018 in Washington, DC. (Photo by Kevin Dietsch-Pool/Getty Images)

RIGHT: People take part in a candle light vigil to remember journalist Jamal Khashoggi outside the Saudi Arabia consulate on October 25, 2018 in Istanbul, Turkey. (Photo by Chris McGrath/Getty Images)

CURRENT POLICY | SAUDI ARABIA

The Trump administration sought to rebuild a strong U.S.-Saudi partnership after ties deteriorated under President Barack Obama. Saudi confidence in U.S. reliability had been rocked by Obama's campaign to improve relations with Iran, the kingdom's arch enemy, culminating in the 2015 nuclear deal, officially known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). But Trump's efforts to strengthen relations with Riyadh suffered a serious setback in late 2018 after Saudi officials murdered journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the kingdom's Istanbul consulate.

Upon entering office, Trump identified Iran as the greatest threat to U.S. interests in the Middle East. He condemned the JCPOA as the worst deal ever, withdrew from the accord, and re-imposed crippling sanctions. Simultaneously, Trump made clear that a revitalized partnership with Riyadh would be a cornerstone of his strategy to counter Iran, combat terrorism, and promote Arab-Israeli peace.

Trump's outreach to the Saudis was marked by its focus on Prince Mohammed bin Salman, or MBS, the son of the Saudi monarch, King Salman. Although just the third-ranking official in the Saudi hierarchy when Trump assumed office, MBS in March 2017 became the first Saudi leader invited to Trump's White House – overstepping the elderly king, whose ability to travel was constrained, but also Crown Prince Mohammed bin Nayef (MBN), the kingdom's longtime interior minister.

Saudi Arabia was the first foreign country that Trump visited as president. The Saudis put on a lavish welcome, assembling more than 50 Muslim heads of state for a summit at which Trump urged Muslims to combat both Sunni terrorism and Iranian aggression. Of particular importance to Trump's "America First" policy were Saudi trade and investment pledges purportedly worth hundreds of billions of dollars.

A month later, in June 2017, Trump's bet on MBS appeared to pay off when King Salman elevated him to the role of crown prince, sacking MBN. The administration welcomed the change, clearly seeing MBS as a strong, modernizing leader and valuable partner.

Despite concern over the rising humanitarian toll of the Yemen war, the administration maintained support for the Saudi-led fight against Iranian-backed Houthi

rebels. It pushed Riyadh to help counter Iranian influence in Iraq. It sought Saudi support to stabilize parts of Syria liberated from the Islamic State. It encouraged expanding Saudi ties with Israel. And in advance of oil sanctions on Iran, Trump pressed Riyadh to prevent a price spike by increasing production to cover lost Iranian exports.

In the face of several highly controversial actions by MBS, the administration was largely passive. There was no serious push back when MBS launched a boycott against Qatar; kidnapped Lebanon's prime minister; detained hundreds of prominent Saudis in Riyadh's Ritz Carlton Hotel; jailed women activists who had previously advocated for MBS' most notable social reform – allowing women to drive; and triggered a crisis with Canada over tweets by its foreign ministry criticizing the detention of human rights activists.

The administration's ability to stand aloof from MBS' mounting controversies collapsed after Khashoggi's murder last October. A vocal MBS critic, Khashoggi was a U.S. resident and contributing columnist at *The Washington Post*. Trump struggled to develop a response that would balance the need to hold Saudi Arabia accountable without endangering the strategic partnership. After the CIA concluded that MBS had foreknowledge of the assassination, Trump stated "maybe he did and maybe he didn't," and pledged to stand with Riyadh regardless.¹¹⁸ The response incensed members of Congress who proceeded to advance legislative initiatives to cut off support for Saudi efforts in Yemen and condemn the crown prince. ■



ASSESSMENT | SAUDI ARABIA

The Trump administration succeeded in its initial effort to overcome the downward spiral in U.S.-Saudi relations triggered by Obama. The decision to counter Iran by strengthening relations with Saudi Arabia resulted in a rapid improvement in ties and several worthwhile achievements.

Perhaps most important for Trump and his “America First” policy, MBS quickly directed major commitments of wealth to the American market, both in the form of arms purchases and investments.¹¹⁹

Even before the Khashoggi murder, events like the mass detentions at the Ritz and the roundup of innocent women’s rights activists tarnished MBS’ modernizing image. Abroad, his inept prosecution of the war in Yemen and the stalemated spat with Qatar raised serious doubts about his utility as a reliable U.S. partner.

Geopolitically, at U.S. urging, the Saudis made a sustained effort to improve relations with Iraq as part of a strategy to counterbalance Iran.¹²⁰ In Syria, the Saudis responded to Trump’s demands for greater burden sharing by committing \$100 million to help finance the stabilization of areas liberated from the Islamic State.¹²¹ With respect to Israel, MBS supported the expansion of Saudi links to the Jewish state and spoke publicly of their shared interest in countering Iran.¹²² MBS also reportedly pressed Palestinian leaders to cooperate with U.S. peace efforts.¹²³ Finally, on the U.S. priority of pressuring Iran, Trump succeeded in getting the Saudis to ramp up oil production quickly, by

roughly a million barrels per day, to cover lost Iranian exports and avoid a damaging price spike.¹²⁴

On the domestic front, MBS undertook a series of reforms that Washington had long advocated as important for Saudi long-term stability. As part of his Vision 2030 program, MBS slashed subsidies, opened jobs to women, lifted the ban on women driving, introduced Western entertainment, reined in the religious police, and denounced extremist Islam.¹²⁵

But MBS also increasingly undertook initiatives that were viewed as deeply reckless. Even before the Khashoggi murder, events like the mass detentions at the Ritz and the roundup of innocent women’s rights activists tarnished MBS’ modernizing image. Abroad, his inept prosecution of the war in Yemen and the stalemated spat with Qatar raised serious doubts about his utility as a reliable U.S. partner.

Almost all these controversies caught the U.S. by surprise – despite the fact that American interests were deeply implicated. The repeated failure of the Trump administration to hold MBS accountable gave him license to indulge his worst instincts. With rare exception (buying more weapons, pumping more oil), Trump largely chose to forego exercising America’s enormous leverage over the kingdom to define a more positive U.S.-Saudi agenda. Instead, his hands-off approach was interpreted by MBS as a blank check to pursue counterproductive tangents. The crisis that erupted after Khashoggi’s murder consolidated the impression that Trump had allowed the relationship to spin out of control. ■

RECOMMENDATIONS | SAUDI ARABIA

In the wake of the Khashoggi debacle, a major course correction is needed in U.S. policy toward Saudi Arabia. Trump's instinct to revive the U.S.-Saudi partnership and take advantage of MBS as a potentially transformational leader was not inherently wrong. But its execution has been deeply flawed.

- 1 Exercise stricter oversight of the relationship.** Assuming MBS survives the Khashoggi crisis, the U.S. can no longer afford to leave him alone to commit repeated unforced errors that endanger U.S. interests. After nearly two years of not having a U.S. ambassador in Riyadh, Trump's appointment of retired General John Abizaid in November was an important step. Trump should ensure that he is fully empowered as his personal representative to the Saudi leadership who can authoritatively convey U.S. interests, set redlines, and act as an early warning system for avoiding crises.
- 2 De-personalize the strategic partnership.** Trying to manage U.S.-Saudi relations solely through MBS has proven sub-optimal. In light of America's wide-ranging geopolitical interests in the kingdom, the relationship should be based on regularized consultations between senior officials across both governments with the expertise and authority to develop common strategies, manage differences, and drive forward a mutually beneficial agenda.
- 3 Leverage MBS' need for U.S. support to advance key U.S. objectives.** So long as MBS remains the kingdom's preeminent decision maker, the administration should preserve its ability to work with him. But it should not absolve him of responsibility for the cloud that rightly hangs over his leadership. MBS has been weakened by the Khashoggi affair and needs U.S. restraint not to undermine his standing further. Trump should exploit that vulnerability and demand systematic action from MBS to address core U.S. concerns, starting with efforts to clean up the messes that he's created – including helping to de-escalate the war in Yemen, cooperating with U.S.-led mediation of the Qatar crisis, and releasing detained human rights activists. Trump should also press Riyadh on further steps to advance U.S. priorities in weakening Iran, expanding Arab-Israeli cooperation, and reversing the disastrous consequences of the kingdom's decades-long propagation of radical Wahhabism. The administration's aim should be recalibrating its relationship with MBS to ensure that Saudi Arabia emerges as a far more chastened, restrained, and reliable U.S. partner.
- 4 Reduce dependence on oil.** The Khashoggi crisis has again exposed the distasteful reality that America's strategic interest in maintaining strong ties to Saudi Arabia frequently comes at a high cost to American values. Much of the kingdom's leverage remains inextricably tied to the critical role it plays in international oil markets. If the U.S. is serious about fundamentally changing the dynamic of its relationship with Riyadh, it should adopt a national strategy to dramatically reduce oil's monopoly over the U.S. transportation sector.



U.S. President Donald Trump holds a working lunch with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in the Oval Office at the White House on March 20, 2018 in Washington, DC. (Photo by Kevin Dietsch-Pool/Getty Images)



YEMEN

Varsha Koduvayur



ABOVE: A fighter with the Tariq Salah Forces a militia aligned with Yemen's Saudi-led coalition-backed government, shows Houthi rebel landmines the militia had recovered, at an outpost a few kilometers from the frontline on September 22, 2018 in Al-Himah, Yemen. (Photo by Andrew Renneisen/Getty Images)

RIGHT: Buildings lay in ruins on September 22, 2018 in Mocha, Yemen. The city was retaken from Houthi rebels in early 2017 as part of Yemen's Saudi-led coalition-backed military campaign that has moved west along Yemen's coast. (Photo by Andrew Renneisen/Getty Images)

CURRENT POLICY | YEMEN

The Trump administration's policy toward Yemen is broadly consistent with the Obama administration's approach. For more than a decade, the U.S. has worked with Yemeni partners and Gulf state allies to address the threat posed by al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and – later on – the Islamic State. Following the outbreak of civil war in 2015, the U.S. supported the Saudi- and Emirati-led coalition fighting on behalf of Yemen's recognized government against both the Iranian-backed Houthi movement and other rebel forces.

Under Obama, the U.S. deployed special operations forces to support the counterterrorism campaign led by the United Arab Emirates (UAE). This policy continued into the Trump presidency. The U.S. also supports the UAE campaign with intelligence, surveillance, aerial refueling, and medical support. Separately, the United States conducts its own airstrikes against AQAP and Islamic State targets. During the first year of the Trump administration, the United States conducted a record 131 strikes in Yemen, more than the previous four years combined, although the pace slowed considerably in 2018.¹²⁶

In 2015, the U.S. began to provide intelligence and logistical support to Saudi and Emirati forces engaged in a separate campaign to restore the internationally recognized government of President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi, which the Houthis had ousted from the capital of Sanaa. U.S. logistical support has included refueling for Saudi warplanes, which has led both American and foreign critics to charge that the U.S. bears significant responsibility for the civilian casualties inflicted by Saudi airstrikes. The airstrikes have also caused significant damage to local infrastructure, limiting the supply of clean water and aggravating the spread of diseases such as cholera. In November 2018, the Pentagon announced that it will no longer conduct mid-air refueling for coalition warplanes, in large part a reaction to congressional outrage triggered by the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi by agents of the Saudi government.

There has been a backlash against the Saudis – and by extension, the U.S. – for worsening Yemen's humanitarian crisis. In particular, the coalition blockade of the Red Sea port of Hudaydah, the main entry point for humanitarian assistance to Houthi-controlled areas, led to a groundswell of criticism. The Trump administration publicly urged Riyadh to lift the blockade, but did not threaten to discontinue U.S. support.¹²⁷

Under withering criticism, the U.S. worked to improve Saudi targeting capabilities to reduce the civilian casualty toll. In 2018, Congress made funding for refueling operations in Yemen contingent on the secretary of state's certification that the Saudis and Emiratis were making progress in reducing civilian casualties and alleviating the humanitarian crisis. In September, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo issued the certification, overruling military and regional specialists at the department who considered it unmerited.¹²⁸

The administration has also worked to raise awareness of Iran's illicit shipments of arms to the Houthis, which violate multiple UN Security Council resolutions. The administration emphasized the threat posed by advanced ballistic missiles whose increased range has enabled the Houthis to reach targets deep inside Saudi Arabia. In December 2017, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley made public physical evidence, including burnt-out remains of an Iranian-produced ballistic missile, demonstrating Iranian culpability.¹²⁹ According to the Saudi Foreign Ministry, the Houthis have fired more than 200 ballistic missiles and tens of thousands of other munitions into the kingdom.¹³⁰ ■



ASSESSMENT | YEMEN

Despite American efforts, the terrorist threat in Yemen remains substantial while Iranian influence continues to grow. Underlying both problems is the collapse of the Yemeni state amidst a multi-sided civil war whose prospects for resolution via UN-led negotiations seem poor. The U.S. has also struggled to find competent partners to lead the campaign in Yemen, with the Saudi role becoming extremely controversial given the kingdom's atrocious humanitarian conduct and allegations that it bought off extremists.

Despite American efforts, the terrorist threat in Yemen remains substantial while Iranian influence continues to grow.

According to the State Department, "Counterterrorism gains in 2017 removed several key leaders and decreased AQAP's freedom of movement, but AQAP and ISIS-Yemen continue to carry out terrorist attacks throughout government-held territory."¹³¹ An investigation by the *Associated Press* also contended that the Saudi- and Emirati-led coalition was creating the illusion of success by negotiating secret deals with al-Qaeda that paid it to retreat from key areas or allowed it to withdraw with its weapons, money, and equipment.¹³² UAE military officials vehemently deny these claims.

Iranian technology has also enabled the Houthi missiles to reach high-profile civilian targets several hundred miles within Saudi Arabia, such as King Khalid International Airport.

The Houthis have faced setbacks on the battlefield, but continue to control both Sanaa and the essential Red Sea port of Hudaydah – though coalition forces have surrounded the port. The Houthi ballistic missile threat has also intensified, with Saudi petroleum infrastructure remaining an important target. Iranian technology has also enabled the Houthi missiles to reach high-profile civilian targets several hundred miles within Saudi Arabia,

such as King Khalid International Airport. Tehran's denials of responsibility ring increasingly hollow, however, thanks to the Trump administration's public presentation of the evidence.

Hezbollah advisers also remain influential in Yemen, and the Houthi television station al-Masirah broadcasts from Hezbollah-controlled southern Beirut. The ideological similarity of the Houthis to the Iranian regime and Hezbollah is apparent from the popular Houthi slogan, "Death to America. Death to Israel. A curse upon the Jews. Victory for Islam."¹³³

The greatest threat to the Trump administration's policy is the bipartisan backlash against Saudi Arabia on Capitol Hill, which the administration has handled poorly. The Saudi murder of Jamal Khashoggi, a columnist for *The Washington Post* and fierce critic of Riyadh, has reinvigorated congressional efforts to end U.S. support for the Saudi- and Emirati-led coalition. The administration has responded by publicly calling for a quick ceasefire in Yemen, ending aerial refueling of coalition aircraft, and supporting a new round of UN-led peace talks that commenced in December 2018, but Congress may demand more. The president himself has aggravated the problem by making inconsistent and unfounded statements about Khashoggi's murder, initially speculating it was the work of "rogue killers."¹³⁴ ■



U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley discusses evidence of Iran's destabilizing activities in the Middle East and Iran's effort to cover up continued violations of UN resolutions during a news conference at Joint Base Anacostia-Bolling in Washington, DC on December, 14, 2017. (DoD photo by EJ Hersom)

RECOMMENDATIONS | YEMEN

- 1 Pressure the coalition to improve its conduct of the war.** The top priority for the administration should be to address the Saudi- and Emirati-led coalition's flawed conduct of the war, so it can turn the spotlight back onto the growing Iranian threat on the Arabian Peninsula, as well as the Houthis' own record of targeting civilians and torturing prisoners.¹³⁵ Given its own long experience with air campaigns, often against adversaries that employ human shields, the U.S. should provide its Gulf allies with the expertise and technology to be more selective. As a senior administration official told journalists, "the more we assist them with targeting and intelligence that limits civilian casualties, the better chance they have of actually limiting them."¹³⁶ The administration should make a major diplomatic push to balance strategic and humanitarian concerns by making clear to the Saudis and Emiratis that they have a relatively brief window in which to improve their conduct or risk facing more drastic action from Congress, including an end to arms sales.
- 2 Underscore the threat from Iran.** Yemen remains a significant front in the struggle against Iranian efforts to project power and threaten U.S. interests. If Iran succeeds in establishing a "southern Hezbollah" on the Arabian Peninsula, it could endanger access to the Bab-el-Mandab Strait and Red Sea, shipping channels that are vital to the global economy. Similarly, an expanding Iranian-supplied missile arsenal on Saudi Arabia's borders would be capable of holding at risk the major population centers and critical energy infrastructure of multiple U.S. allies. While supporting a responsible end to the conflict, the Trump administration should highlight at every opportunity the potentially disastrous costs of simply abandoning the Saudi-led coalition. Unilaterally cutting off all U.S. support would inevitably bolster the war effort of the Houthis and their Iranian sponsors. It would encourage their belief that the coalition is fracturing and that if they only hold out long enough, the Houthis might still win an outright military victory.
- 3 Get the coalition to be forthcoming in UN-led negotiations.** A fresh round of talks began in December 2018 in Sweden, the first peace talks to convene in two years. The negotiations produced a fragile agreement on a prisoner swap and a ceasefire in Hudaydah, but in the weeks since, the Houthis have systematically violated the ceasefire, launching as many as 300 attacks. The Houthis have also obstructed further progress on other outcomes from the talks, including opening key roads and issuing permission to UN equipment and personnel bound for Hudaydah.¹³⁷ While the odds are long that negotiations can resolve the conflict anytime soon, the U.S. and its partners should be seen as making every reasonable effort to de-escalate the fighting, reduce human suffering, and end the war. If negotiations stall or fail, it is essential that fair-minded observers conclude that the Houthis and their Iranian backers bear the onus of responsibility.
- 4 Decouple the Yemen war from the crisis surrounding Mohammed bin Salman and the Khashoggi affair.** Congress risks turning policy toward the Yemen war into a broader referendum on Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's record. Attempts to punish the kingdom for Khashoggi's murder by withholding U.S. support in Yemen is likely to undo gains the U.S., with its coalition partners, has made against al-Qaeda and Iran. The backlash against Saudi Arabia over the killing is justified, but Congress should seek to decouple the Khashoggi crisis from broader U.S. security aims and humanitarian concerns in Yemen.



AFGHANISTAN

Thomas Joscelyn and Bill Roggio



ABOVE: American soldiers from the 10th Mountain Division deploy to fight Taliban fighters as part of Operation Mountain Thrust to a U.S. base near the village of Deh Afghan on June 22, 2006 in the Zabul province of Afghanistan. (Photo by John Moore/Getty Images)

RIGHT: Taliban promotes training camp for 'Commando Mujahidin.' (FDD's Long War Journal)

CURRENT POLICY | AFGHANISTAN

On August 21, 2017, President Trump announced his strategy for the war in Afghanistan. After a rancorous debate within the administration, the president finally took a clear position. “My original instinct was to pull out — and, historically, I like following my instincts,” Trump said.¹³⁸ But somewhat unexpectedly, Trump explained that a “hasty withdrawal” would only allow al-Qaeda and the Islamic State to enjoy safe havens inside Afghanistan, from which they could threaten the U.S. and its allies. Trump approved the deployment of several thousand more American troops, declaring that the “men and women who serve our nation in combat deserve a plan for victory.”

President Trump’s plan had four parts. First, the U.S. would “shift from a time-based approach to one based on conditions.” That is, the U.S. would not set an arbitrary timetable for troop deployments and withdrawal, as President Obama had when announcing his own surge of forces into Afghanistan in December 2009. Obama’s public timetable made it easy for the jihadists to wait the U.S. out, as they knew that the Americans coming to fight them would begin going home in just 18 months.

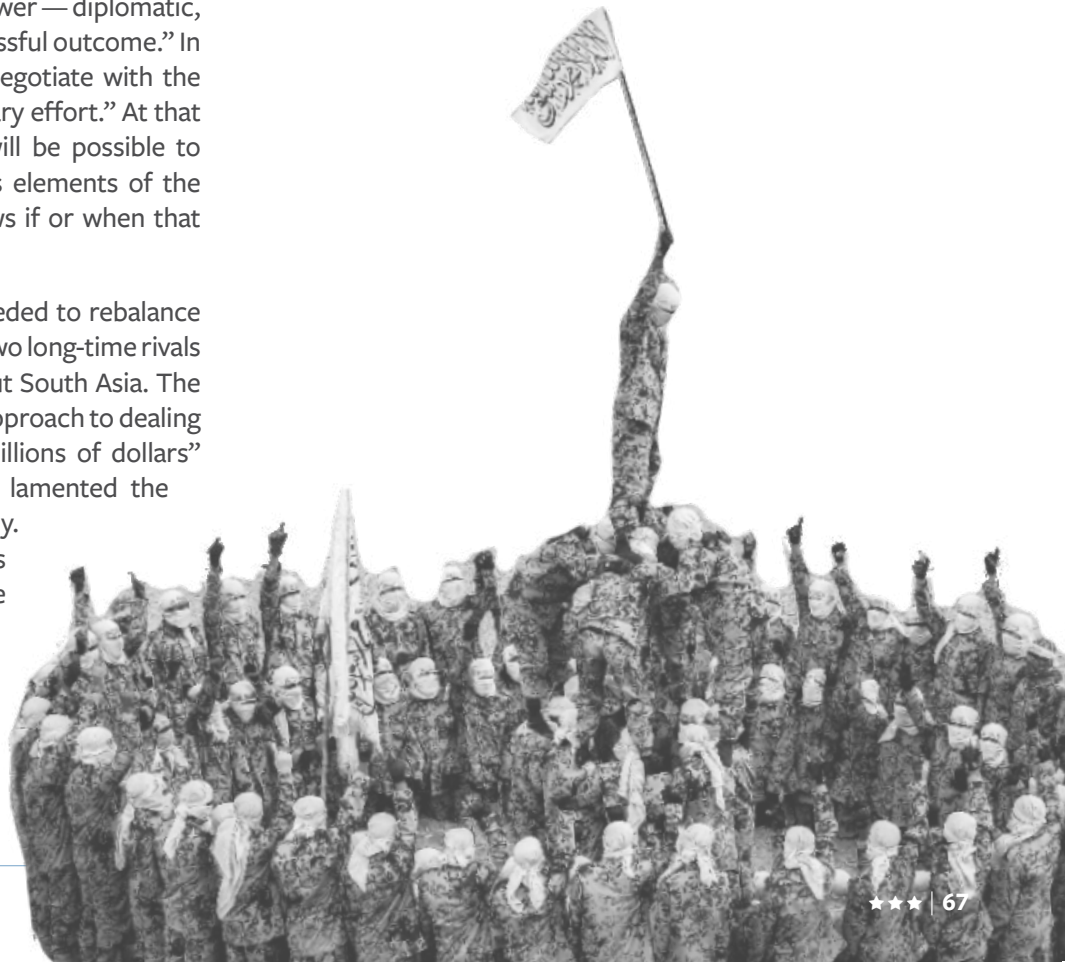
Second, Trump announced that his strategy would integrate “all instruments of American power — diplomatic, economic, and military — toward a successful outcome.” In that vein, the U.S. would be willing to negotiate with the Taliban, but only “after an effective military effort.” At that point, the president said, “perhaps it will be possible to have a political settlement that includes elements of the Taliban in Afghanistan, but nobody knows if or when that will ever happen.”

Third, Trump argued that the U.S. needed to rebalance its relationships with Pakistan and India, two long-time rivals that have competing interests throughout South Asia. The Trump administration would change its approach to dealing with Pakistan. Citing the “billions and billions of dollars” the U.S. has provided Pakistan, Trump lamented the duplicitous behavior of America’s frenemy. The president harshly criticized Pakistan’s long-running practice of providing safe

havens for jihadist groups, especially the Taliban, which targets American forces in Afghanistan. Trump added that America would “further develop its strategic partnership with India.” He wanted India to do more to “help us” with Afghanistan, “especially in the area of economic assistance and development.”

Fourth, and finally, President Trump said Washington would stop micromanaging the troops in the field, allowing “wartime commanders and frontline soldiers” to react in “real time.” The president approved a loosening of the “rules of engagement,” allowing American forces to more frequently target the Taliban, al-Qaeda, and the Islamic State’s Afghan arm, as well as associated criminal networks. The administration intended these changes, in part, to allow the U.S. military to engage the Taliban more frequently than it had under Obama, whose administration came to view the Taliban as an enemy of the Afghan government, but not of the United States.

In sum, the Trump administration’s plan for Afghanistan boiled down to more assistance for the Afghan government, while putting pressure on Pakistan to be more cooperative. ■



ASSESSMENT | AFGHANISTAN

More than one year after President Trump's speech, little is working. No one – including President Trump – speaks of “victory.” Recent reports suggest that the president is looking to withdraw several thousand, and perhaps more, troops from Afghanistan.¹³⁹ The jihadists are well positioned to capitalize on an American withdrawal. The Taliban contests or controls more ground today than at any point since October 2001. More than 60 percent of Afghanistan's districts are either up for grabs or under the jihadists' domain.¹⁴⁰

The Taliban contests or controls more ground today than at any point since October 2001. More than 60 percent of Afghanistan's districts are either up for grabs or under the jihadists' domain.

Afghan military and security forces are struggling to stop the Taliban from gaining more ground, while suffering a high rate of attrition. The terrorists regularly strike inside Kabul, and both the Taliban and the Islamic State's Afghan arm are able to attack government and civilian facilities with alarming frequency. According to the UN, civilian casualties in and around Kabul are at, or near, a record high.¹⁴¹

Instead of pursuing victory, the Trump administration is seeking to cajole the Taliban into negotiating a political settlement with the Kabul government. Whereas Trump's August 2017 speech made success on the battlefield a prerequisite for negotiations, the administration has now dispensed with that requirement.

The pursuit of a negotiated settlement is almost certain to fail because the Taliban will not compromise with a government in Kabul it considers to be an illegitimate Western puppet. In fact, the Taliban's leaders rejected the October 2018 parliamentary elections on religious grounds. After warning civilians not to vote, the Taliban attacked voting sites throughout the country, killing or wounding hundreds of civilians.

The Obama administration also attempted to negotiate a peace with the Taliban, resulting in a predictable fiasco. The Taliban extracted concessions, giving up nothing of value in return, while further exacerbating tensions between the U.S. and its Afghan allies. The U.S. has even less leverage today, as the number of U.S. troops in country is about 15,000 – far fewer than the 100,000-plus at the peak of Obama's surge. The current talks run the risk of, once again, legitimizing the Taliban at the expense of America's Afghan allies. Although the Afghan government remains weak and corrupt, its forces are the chief roadblock to the jihadists' advances.

With regard to Pakistan, the U.S. followed through on President Trump's well-placed criticism by withholding tens of millions of dollars in Foreign Military Financing in 2017 and 2018. However, the State Department confirms that Pakistan's military and intelligence establishment continues to provide sanctuaries for terrorist organizations, including the Afghan Taliban's leadership. In particular, the Pakistanis remain unwilling to hunt down members of the powerful al-Qaeda-linked Haqqani Network, which is an integral part of the Taliban's hierarchy. As a result, the Taliban's chain-of-command remains intact and the group's decision-makers are under no pressure to make a deal. The last time the U.S. killed a senior Taliban figure in Pakistan was in May 2016, when a drone strike killed the group's overall leader, Mullah Mansour, just after he returned from Iran.

The rules of engagement for U.S. troops in Afghanistan remain classified, but there is evidence that military personnel now carry out more counterterrorism strikes and directly target the Taliban's robust narcotics trafficking network. This is an improvement, but the effects are mainly tactical. The U.S. dropped more bombs in Afghanistan in 2018 than in any year in the previous decade.¹⁴² This has stopped the Taliban from taking over major cities and destroyed drug facilities that are used to fuel the insurgency. But the Taliban retains its rural strongholds and is poised to pounce on Afghanistan's cities if and when American troops are withdrawn. Despite suffering a series of leadership and territorial losses in eastern Afghanistan, the Islamic State's upstart branch has not been defeated either. ■

RECOMMENDATIONS | AFGHANISTAN

There is no political or popular will in the U.S. to spend the blood and treasure necessary to defeat the Taliban. But the Taliban, which remains closely allied with al-Qaeda, is stronger than at any point since October 2001. Therefore, the U.S. retains a compelling interest in limiting the terrorist threat emanating from South Asia.

- 1 Sanction any Pakistani officials working with the Taliban and its subgroup, the Haqqani Network.** In a bid to restrict the Taliban’s financing, the Trump administration has publicly identified and designated as terrorists certain Taliban commanders working with officials in Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force. The administration has also sanctioned members of the Quds Force itself. The Trump administration should apply this same financial pressure to Pakistani officials, who have allowed the Taliban insurgency to thrive. That said, the administration should not overestimate the impact of sanctions in the absence of a more effective strategy.
- 2 Reassess the Taliban and al-Qaeda’s presence in Afghanistan, using captured files and other intelligence.** The Obama administration decided that the Taliban was not really America’s enemy and attempted to define al-Qaeda down. These erroneous assessments have stuck, as the U.S. government continues to downplay the extent of the Taliban’s relationship with al-Qaeda, while also erroneously claiming that al-Qaeda has only a *de minimus* presence in country. However, these assessments are contradicted by a wealth of evidence, including the files recovered in Osama bin Laden’s compound and other recovered al-Qaeda caches, as well as operational data. At a minimum, such a reassessment will be necessary if the U.S. tries to maintain a counterterrorism posture in Afghanistan.
- 3 Continue to target the Taliban’s shadow government as long as the U.S. remains in Afghanistan.** The Taliban has built a parallel governance structure throughout much of the country. This is part of the organization’s plan to resurrect its Islamic Emirate in full. The U.S. is already targeting Taliban shadow governors and their deputies, but this campaign could be expanded. Moreover, the U.S. is not targeting those senior Taliban officials headquartered in Pakistan. The Trump administration should look for opportunities to take out the Taliban’s top leadership, which is not willing to cut a peace deal, but is very much planning to rule over Afghanistan once again.



A member of the Afghan Local Police walks past the Momand Valley on July 16, 2017. (Photo by Andrew Renneisen/Getty Images)



SUNNI JIHADISM

Daveed Gartenstein-Ross



ABOVE: Abubakar Shekau as seen in an archival Boko Haram video. (FDD's Long War Journal)

RIGHT: Fighters from Islamist group Ansar Dine in the desert outside Timbuktu, Mali. (AP)

CURRENT POLICY | SUNNI JIHADISM

President Trump's tendency toward sharp and sudden policy reversals has been pronounced on Sunni jihadism, with his stunning December 2018 announcement that the Islamic State had been defeated, so American troops would withdraw from Syria imminently. Senior White House officials then suggested the withdrawal would be conditions-based, leaving ambiguity about how long U.S. troops would remain.¹⁴³ If implemented, a quick withdrawal would have a greater impact on the conflict with Sunni jihadism than anything else the administration has done in its first two years.

Syria policy aside, America's counterterrorism efforts since 9/11 generally reflect continuity across three ideologically divergent administrations. In part, this is because once the gears of government are set in motion for such a large issue, significant changes can be hard and costly. In part, it is because the enemy gets a vote, and the Sunni jihadist threat has been persistent.

The Trump administration's National Strategy for Counterterrorism claims to "set forth a new approach,"¹⁴⁴ yet Joshua Geltzer, who served capably as the National Security Council's senior director for counterterrorism from 2015-17, assessed Trump's strategy document as "a generally mainstream strategy issued under the name of this decidedly non-mainstream president."¹⁴⁵ Perhaps the most notable difference from Obama's strategy is the new document's use of the phrase "radical Islamist terrorism."¹⁴⁶ But language does not a strategy make.

It would also be a mistake to see the Trump administration's approach as a unified strategy, rather than a mix of various approaches. One attribute of this mix has been more aggressive targeting, for example in the use of drone strikes. Likewise, the Trump administration loosened the U.S. military's rules of battlefield engagement.

A second attribute of the policy mix during the administration's first two years was increased pressure on the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria – something the announced withdrawal would change. The Trump administration intensified, and somewhat matured,

the use of proxy forces, particularly the People's Protection Units (YPG), a Syrian Kurdish group that has been effective fighting against the Islamic State.

A third attribute was ending the CIA program supporting Syrian rebel groups. As Reuters reported in July 2017, Trump "decided to halt the CIA's covert program to equip and train certain rebel groups fighting the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad."¹⁴⁷ This included groups affiliated with the Free Syrian Army, such as Osoud al-Sharqiya, which is on record stating that it received CIA support before the program ended.¹⁴⁸

A fourth attribute, also distinct from Obama's approach, is reducing the prominence of, and funding for, CVE programming. Countering violent extremism (CVE) is a tool for preventing radicalization and recruitment that came to be identified with Obama's approach to terrorism, though it had its origins in the Bush administration. The Trump administration significantly reduced funding for what was formerly known as the Office for Community Partnerships, the Department of Homeland Security's lead organ for CVE. The Trump counterterrorism strategy does include preventive and counter-messaging elements, and has made one distinctive shift by treating them as more integrated into, and less separate from, other counterterrorism efforts. ■



ASSESSMENT | SUNNI JIHADISM

Trump has, with some justification, listed the Islamic State's collapse as a territorial entity as one of his administration's accomplishments. Yet there is no basis for President Trump's claim that "we have won against ISIS."¹⁴⁹ Further, despite the Islamic State's territorial losses, the overall problem of Sunni jihadism has been dangerously expanding over successive administrations. Both al-Qaeda and the Islamic State operate in more countries than ever. More jihadists are fighting for control of collapsed countries than at any point since the 9/11 attacks. Despite the loss of its caliphate, the Islamic State has made a comeback in Syria and Iraq as an insurgent force. In Afghanistan, the Taliban controls more territory than at any time since 2001, and the prospects for its return to power are growing. The relatively consistent U.S. approach to the problem across administrations has not succeeded in diminishing the challenge of Sunni jihadism.

Both al-Qaeda and the Islamic State operate in more countries than ever. More jihadists are fighting for control of collapsed countries than at any point since the 9/11 attacks.

Aggressive targeting, which helped speed the Islamic State's territorial decline, is a double-edged sword: It can cause an enemy to collapse more quickly, but can also produce civilian casualties. This has moral implications, and when a state is battling against a non-state actor, civilian casualties can fuel an insurgency.

On the other hand, it is worth noting what legal scholar and retired General Charles Dunlap refers to as "the moral hazard of inaction." Less aggressive targeting does

not necessarily reduce *overall* civilian casualties because, for example, "the ISIS fighters who might have been killed lived on to butcher civilians."¹⁵⁰ On the whole, the Trump administration's loosened rules of engagement appear beneficial; but they have not stopped the Islamic State from regrouping as insurgents.

The administration's use of proxies (a continuation of Obama's approach) also contributed to the Islamic State's territorial collapse, but our partners on the ground have created their own difficulties. The YPG has alienated Turkey, and does not operate well outside of Kurdish areas. Indeed, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's pressure to end U.S. support for Kurdish forces apparently factored heavily in Trump's withdrawal announcement.¹⁵¹ That said, the use of proxies is likely unavoidable. The impact of a quick American withdrawal from Syria on our Kurdish allies should be a strong consideration as the executive branch decides whether to follow through on Trump's announcement.

CIA support for the Syrian rebels fighting Assad was not an effective use of proxies, so Trump was right to end it. The CIA program had helped some of the worst jihadist groups, including those explicitly aligned with al-Qaeda, to gain ground in Syria.¹⁵²

With regard to CVE, scaling back domestic programming has weakened an effective tool for preventing radicalization.¹⁵³ A reduction was perhaps inevitable, since the Trump administration is highly controversial in key communities the government has engaged through CVE programs. Nonetheless, the administration has too steeply reduced CVE programming, and many organs and policies for countering violent extremism will eventually have to be rebuilt. ■

RECOMMENDATIONS | SUNNI JIHADISM

There is a distinct lack of clarity about whether American troops will withdraw from Syria imminently. A hasty withdrawal would certainly make Sunni jihadism a graver problem. The Islamic State is not defeated, and a U.S. withdrawal would hurt America's Kurdish allies as Turkey moves in to northern Syria. Turkey's engagement would likely also strengthen non-Islamic State Sunni jihadists in the area, with whom Turkey has proved too eager to align in the past. Fortunately, there is still time to slow the pace of this announced withdrawal.

Beyond the withdrawal question, the U.S. continues to struggle in its engagements against violent non-state actors. This difficulty is analogous to the problem "legacy industries" have when they compete with startup firms in the economic sphere: bureaucratic actors have difficulty coordinating strategy and matching their policies to the current technological landscape.¹⁵⁴ The administration will have the greatest positive impact if it can address these systemic factors that affect the ability of the U.S. counterterrorism "industry" to innovate and adapt:

- 1 Undertake selective de-bureaucratization.** Find discrete problems that can be de-bureaucratized, basically a "startup-within-government" model. One area where this would have been effective is counter-Islamic State messaging.¹⁵⁵ To some extent, that specific opportunity has passed both because social media companies have suspended pro-Islamic State accounts and, more importantly, because of the Islamic State's battlefield losses. But counter-Islamic State messaging still provides a model for future selective de-bureaucratization: It was a discrete problem set that could be handled by a relatively small team of employees and contractors, and success or failure would be measurable. The more selective de-bureaucratization the U.S. government undertakes, the better the model we will have for the future.
- 2 Reform the acquisition process.** Some steps have been taken to fix the U.S. government's archaic acquisition process. Successful counterterrorism efforts will, for better or worse, require the U.S. government to work with private partners. The current system often ensures inferior services at premium prices. For example, lowest price technically acceptable (LPTA) contracts force the government to select the cheapest qualifying bid without any consideration of quality. The government has awarded LPTA contracts where the literal difference between the winning and losing bids was three cents. In no area of life – buying jeans or a car, choosing a lawn-care service – would a paltry three-cent difference be the deciding factor in selecting a good or service without examining its quality.
- 3 Objectively assess analysis.** Some of the biggest policy mistakes the U.S. government has made since the onset of the "war on terror" have stemmed from misunderstanding the adversary. There have been credible complaints about the politicization of intelligence, including those coming out of CENTCOM toward the end of the Obama administration.¹⁵⁶ Creating objective metrics for assessing analysis and performance is no small task, but in the world of big data and advanced analytics, there is greater potential than ever.
- 4 Work toward getting the big picture right.** All of the above are relatively limited areas where government-led reforms can make definable improvements. But the big picture is that Sunni jihadism is still growing. This is a problem that better bidding procedures or analytic performance evaluations will not solve. One might be tempted to point to the imperative of undermining jihadist ideology and addressing bad governance – policies that used to be called nation building. But U.S. nation building efforts have not been particularly effective in the post-9/11 world, raising difficult questions about how to put a real dent in the broader problem.



ARMS CONTROL & NONPROLIFERATION

Orde Kittrie and Behnam Ben Taleblu



ABOVE: S-75 Dvina, a Russian surface-to-air missile.

*RIGHT: Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD),
an American anti-ballistic missile defense system.*

CURRENT POLICY | ARMS CONTROL & NONPROLIFERATION

The Trump administration's 2018 Nuclear Posture Review states, "Progress in arms control is not an end in and of itself, and depends on the security environment and the participation of willing partners."¹⁵⁷ The skepticism of this statement underscores the current administration's departure from its predecessor's strong inclination to maintain existing agreements.

The U.S. withdrawal from the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran and the threat to suspend and/or withdraw from the 1987 Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty with Russia are the most significant expressions of its new policy. With regard to chemical weapons, the administration twice launched airstrikes in response to Syrian attacks, whereas the Obama White House granted a reprieve to Damascus after it pledged to relinquish its chemical arsenal. Nonetheless, the Trump administration is attempting to reach a nuclear disarmament pact with North Korea. The contrast between these approaches reflects the particular circumstances of Washington's bilateral relationship with each of its negotiating partners.

As a candidate, President Trump campaigned vigorously against the nuclear deal with Iran, formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). The administration sought European support for tightening the deal's restrictions on Iran, but consensus remained elusive. The U.S. ultimately withdrew in May 2018.

There was considerable surprise when the Trump administration used force against Bashar al-Assad after his use of chemical weapons against civilians in Syria, since Trump had previously criticized humanitarian interventions. The president explained his decision as a response to wrenching images of children suffering from the effects of poison gas, thus seeking to punish Assad for his use of chemical weapons and enforce a longstanding global norm.

The INF treaty had been a significant point of contention between the U.S. and Russia during the Obama administration, when it became clear that Russia was building a cruise missile with a range that violated the treaty.¹⁵⁸ Hoping to preserve the INF treaty, Obama sought to coax the Russians back into compliance. As recently as February 2018, the Trump administration's Nuclear Posture Review affirmed the previous administration's policy. One likely contributor to this reversal was China,

which is not a party to the bilateral accord. China's growing ground-based missile arsenal can challenge the U.S. in the Pacific theater while the INF treaty prohibits the U.S. from building, testing, or deploying ground-based ballistic or cruise missiles globally.

The administration has stated its intention to withdraw from the INF treaty, but has not provided the formal six-month notice that the treaty requires.¹⁵⁹ However, on December 4, 2018, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced that the U.S. will suspend its own INF obligations unless Russia comes back into compliance within 60 days.¹⁶⁰ The administration will also soon face the different question of whether to renew the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) with Russia, which entered into force in 2011 and is set to expire in 2021.

With regard to North Korea, Trump initially threatened Kim Jong Un with "fire and fury,"¹⁶¹ yet in June 2018, he met with Kim in Singapore. Since the Singapore summit, Trump has spoken positively of Kim, although negotiations on the North's denuclearization have made minimal progress.

Notwithstanding these policy changes vis-à-vis the Iranian, Syrian, Russian, and North Korean WMD challenges, the administration appears to be maintaining select elements of past arms control and nonproliferation policies. These include support for the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, nuclear deterrence, and robust efforts to promote nuclear security and counter nuclear smuggling.¹⁶² The administration is also continuing to focus on the WMD threat from terrorist groups.¹⁶³ ■



ASSESSMENT | ARMS CONTROL & NONPROLIFERATION

The U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA, and threatened INF treaty withdrawal, sent a signal to adversaries and allies alike that the U.S. may not keep agreements that others violate in spirit or in letter, or which no longer serve its interests. Rival or rogue states can no longer assume that inertial adherence to arms control or nonproliferation accords will constrain U.S. options in the face of graduated escalation, incremental violations, or significant changes in the threat environment.

Whatever the wisdom of the JCPOA withdrawal from an Iran policy perspective, the signal that it sent can provide U.S. negotiators with valuable leverage with respect to other flawed agreements. However, the U.S. must avoid prematurely withdrawing from those other agreements when national security would be better served by leveraging the credible threat of withdrawal to achieve enhanced terms or compliance.

By withdrawing from the deal, Washington can now adopt a maximum pressure strategy aimed at simultaneously reducing Iran's nuclear, missile, terrorism, and regional threats, rather than temporarily diminishing the nuclear threat while inadvertently bolstering the others, as was the case with the JCPOA.

While it is too early to judge the success of the Trump administration's key policy changes in the arms control and nonproliferation arenas, there are some early indicators. So far, Trump's withdrawal from the JCPOA has not led Iran to accelerate its nuclear program, an outcome many experts anticipated. Instead, Iran continues to conform to key JCPOA commitments, while European leaders seek to salvage the agreement. Perhaps more importantly, by withdrawing from the deal, Washington can now adopt a maximum pressure strategy aimed at simultaneously reducing Iran's nuclear, missile, terrorism, and regional threats, rather than temporarily diminishing the nuclear threat while inadvertently bolstering the others, as was the case with the JCPOA. Of course, as the pressure on Iran

escalates, the clerical regime may accelerate its nuclear program in response.

The Trump administration's air strikes on Syria sent a limited, but important, message that there is a price to pay for using chemical weapons. Nonetheless, Assad retains his chemical capabilities and is still in power.

The results of the threatened U.S. withdrawal from the INF treaty are not yet known. Experts disagree as to whether the U.S. should, or even effectively could, diversify its missile assets in the Pacific theater as a counter to China's unconstrained missile force. Alternatively, the U.S. may seek a new agreement with Russia, or both Russia and China, after increasing its diplomatic leverage.

The administration's engagement with North Korea has been accompanied by a year-long pause in Pyongyang's missile and nuclear tests. Yet there are also indications that North Korea's nuclear production continues unabated while the Kim regime engages in deception over its ballistic missile capabilities and intentions.

Substantial risk remains that North Korea has no real intention of dismantling its nuclear program, but rather expects Washington and Seoul to offer a continual stream of concessions to keep Pyongyang at the table – a gambit that Kim and his father employed repeatedly in the past.

Currently, it is challenging to measure the success the administration has had towards reducing or eliminating the WMD threat from non-state actors. Under the previous administration, some of the most significant attempts to thwart the chemical capabilities of the Islamic State came as part of a larger military campaign¹⁶⁴. However, as noted by Chris Ford, assistant secretary of state for international security and nonproliferation¹⁶⁵, success in countering WMD terrorism also inevitably requires close cooperation with foreign governments – as exemplified by the George W. Bush administration's innovative Proliferation Security Initiative – and various international organizations, including the International Atomic Energy Agency. Such cooperation may be hindered by this administration's relatively hostile broader posture regarding both traditional allies and international organizations. However, even under the best circumstances, an effective defense against WMD terrorism can be elusive, as the National Strategy for Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction Terrorism admits¹⁶⁶. ■

RECOMMENDATIONS | ARMS CONTROL & NONPROLIFERATION

The Trump administration has made a point of challenging flawed agreements, yet it must avoid doing so at the expense of the integrity of the nonproliferation regime or in a manner that cedes previous gains made in this area. It also should remain mindful of the interests of key allies.

- 1 Resurrect cooperation between the executive branch and Congress on arms control and nonproliferation issues.** There is considerable precedent for congressional participation in the negotiation of arms control agreements. For example, during the 1980s and 1990s, the Senate Arms Control Observer Group provided a useful official role for senators to join U.S. delegations as they negotiated arms control treaties, including the INF treaty. Today, the Observer Group's successor – the moribund National Security Working Group – should be reinvigorated.
- 2 Enhance nuclear monitoring and verification capabilities.** A 2014 report by the Pentagon's Defense Science Board assessed that U.S. government tools are "either inadequate, or more often, do not exist" for such challenges as detecting and monitoring "small nuclear enterprises designed to produce, store, and deploy only a small number of weapons" as well as "undeclared facilities and/or covert operations, such as ... acquisition of materials through theft or purchase."¹⁶⁷ The administration should place higher priority on enhancing such capabilities.
- 3 Enhance cooperative efforts to detect and disrupt illicit WMD procurement efforts.** The United States should develop stronger partnerships between government and industry, expand the Proliferation Security Initiative to include additional countries, encourage countries to impose stronger sentences on convicted WMD traffickers, and remove impediments to transnational cooperation in prosecuting WMD traffickers.
- 4 Ensure that the new National Biodefense Strategy is adequately resourced and robustly implemented.** Biotechnology advances make biological weapons increasingly available and attractive to terrorists.
- 5 Promote further adherence to and implementation of the Missile Technology Control Regime and the Hague Code of Conduct Against Ballistic Missile Proliferation.** This is especially important for regions where missile proliferation continues unconstrained.
- 6 Remain open to extending the New START treaty for five years.** It seems likely that the U.S. will, on balance, benefit from extending the New START treaty when it expires in 2021. Because New START limits the number of Russian and U.S. strategic nuclear weapons and delivery systems, and includes various verification and transparency measures, extension will likely further strategic stability, including by bounding U.S.-Russian competition in this arena. However, an openness to extension should not preclude consideration of other options, such as renegotiation, and continued assessment of the agreement's value to U.S. national security in light of changes in the threat environment, including Russian development of weapons that may not be captured by New START limits.
- 7 Promote nonproliferation in the Middle East.**¹⁶⁸ The Trump administration should work to bridge the U.S.-Europe gap regarding the JCPOA and its future. In nuclear cooperation agreements with Middle East countries, the U.S. and Europe should continue to pursue the adoption of provisions that preclude indigenous enrichment or reprocessing capabilities. It should build on warming relations between Israel and the Arab world to promote regional cooperation on nonproliferation issues, including preventing acquisition and use of chemical and biological weapons, as well as confidence and security building measures regarding missiles. Finally, it should encourage and assist the enhancement of Middle Eastern capacity and will to prevent non-state actors from acquiring nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons and their means of delivery.



DEFENSE

Bradley Bowman



ABOVE: An F/A-18 Hornet pilot prepares for take off during a joint military exercise aboard the USS George H.W. Bush on August 6, 2017. (Photo by Dan Kitwood/Getty Images)

RIGHT: Royal Marines take part in a raid during Exercise Joint Warrior on April 27, 2018 in Dalbeattie, Scotland. The exercise involved some 11,600 military personnel from 17 nations in one of the largest exercises of its kind in Europe. (Photo by Jeff J Mitchell/Getty Images)

CURRENT POLICY | DEFENSE

The Trump administration's 2018 National Defense Strategy serves as an effective guide to the Department of Defense's objectives and strategy during Secretary of Defense James Mattis' tenure. The National Defense Strategy begins with two premises: 1) The U.S. has displayed a dangerous degree of strategic complacency since the 1990s as great power competition reemerged; and 2) The United States has failed to make sufficient investments in military readiness. Consequently, the U.S. competitive military advantage has eroded.¹⁶⁹

While the National Defense Strategy identifies China, Russia, North Korea, Iran, and terrorist groups as significant threats, the administration believes that the reemergence of great power competition with China and Russia represents the greatest challenge. A key component of this competition is an intense race to rapidly develop and deploy the latest technological advancements. Simultaneously, competitors have increasingly utilized tactics short of armed conflict ("gray-zone tactics") to threaten U.S. interests and undermine the post-World War II international order that has facilitated international peace and prosperity.¹⁷⁰

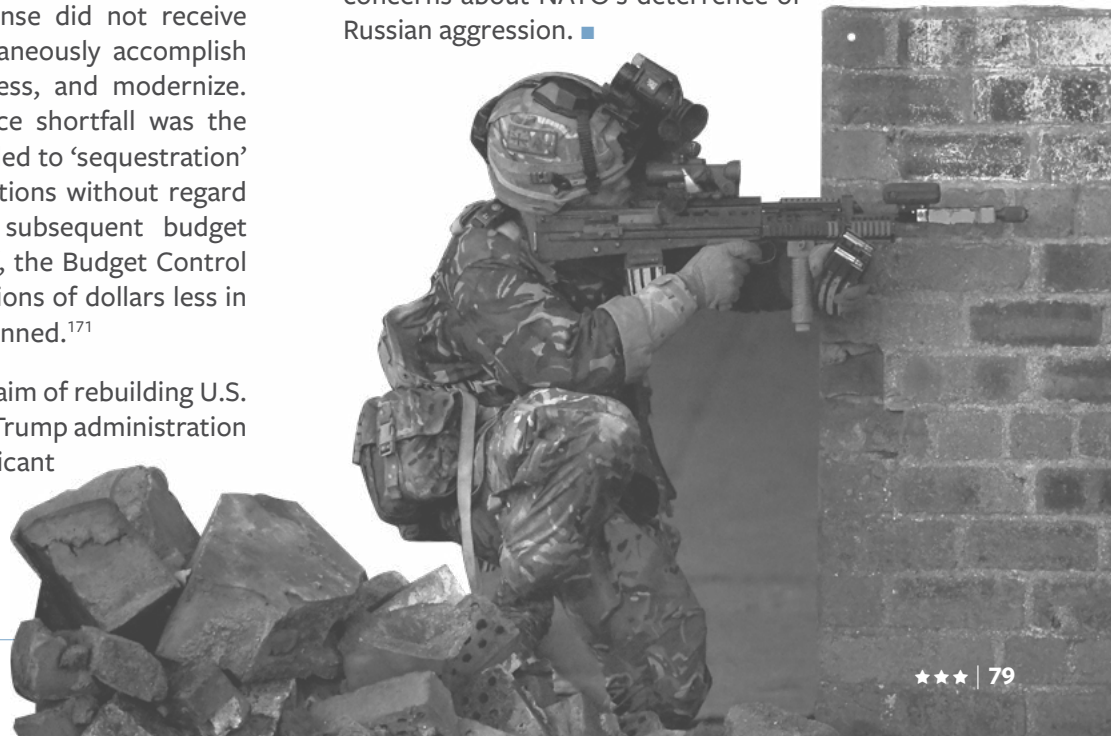
In response, the National Defense Strategy prioritizes three primary lines of effort: rebuilding military readiness and a more lethal force, strengthening alliances, and reforming the Defense Department's business practices to improve agility, innovation, and efficiency.

Following the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and until recently, the Department of Defense did not receive the resources necessary to simultaneously accomplish current missions, maintain readiness, and modernize. The primary cause of this resource shortfall was the Budget Control Act of 2011, which led to 'sequestration' – across-the-board spending reductions without regard for strategic importance. While subsequent budget agreements provided modest relief, the Budget Control Act still resulted in hundreds of billions of dollars less in defense spending than originally planned.¹⁷¹

Over the last two years, with the aim of rebuilding U.S. military readiness and lethality, the Trump administration requested and received significant

additional funding for the Department of Defense, reversing a seven-year trend. Specifically, in March 2017, to address urgent combat readiness shortfalls and accelerate progress against the Islamic State, the Trump administration requested \$30 billion in additional Fiscal Year (FY) 2017 funding for the Defense Department. In its first full budget request, the Trump administration requested \$639 billion for FY 2018 compared to the Obama administration's FY 2017 request of \$583 billion. For FY 2019, the Trump administration requested \$686 billion – a 10 percent real increase over the previous continuing resolution level. For FY 2019, for the first time in years, Congress passed both the defense authorization and appropriation bills before the beginning of the new fiscal year. Over the last two years, the Department of Defense has used the increased funding to begin to halt the deterioration of U.S. military readiness and conventional military superiority.

In addition to this focus on military readiness, the Defense and State Departments have worked to reinforce key partnerships and alliances in the Middle East and Asia. The Defense Department has also worked with allies to expand the military readiness, capability, and capacity of NATO. With some success, the Trump administration has pressured NATO allies to spend more on defense. As it turns out, the defense spending of our NATO allies has actually been increasing since 2015.¹⁷² However, doubts about the president's commitment to the alliance and collective defense have compounded concerns about NATO's deterrence of Russian aggression. ■



ASSESSMENT | DEFENSE

Congressional testimony less than a month after the president's inauguration demonstrates the severity of the readiness challenge that the administration inherited. A failure to modernize had led to an "outraged, outgunned, and outdated" Army that could accomplish its missions only at "high military risk."¹⁷³ The Navy was the smallest in nearly a century, and "overall readiness [had] reached its lowest levels in many years."¹⁷⁴ The Air Force's fleet was the oldest in the service's history, with readiness "at a near all-time low."¹⁷⁵ Given these facts, it is not surprising that the congressionally mandated 2018 National Defense Strategy Commission concluded, "America's ability to defend its allies, its partners, and its own vital interests is increasingly in doubt."¹⁷⁶

The congressionally mandated 2018 National Defense Strategy Commission concluded, "America's ability to defend its allies, its partners, and its own vital interests is increasingly in doubt."

This readiness crisis emerged over an extended period and will take years to reverse. Since 9/11, the pace of operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as the bipartisan failure to provide sufficient, timely, and predictable funding, forced the Department of Defense to postpone modernization. Meanwhile, China and Russia studied American weaknesses, developed asymmetric capabilities, and modernized their forces.

On balance, thanks to a generally well-formulated strategy and increased funding, the administration has begun addressing America's military readiness crisis. In April 2018 testimony, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Dunford testified, "we have begun to arrest the erosion of our competitive advantage," citing investments in end strength, training, ammunition stocks, and modernization.¹⁷⁷

In addition to these areas of focus, the Army has increased soldier deployment readiness and implemented key institutional reforms, including the creation of Army Futures Command.¹⁷⁸ The Navy has invested in ship and

aircraft depot maintenance and procured 22 battle force ships in FY 2017 and 2018.¹⁷⁹ The Air Force has achieved weapons systems sustainment improvements, expedited acquisition processes, and eliminated a 4,000-airman maintainer shortage.¹⁸⁰ The Marine Corps has met aviation combat readiness standards for the first time in years and achieved significant improvements in readiness rates for mission essential equipment.¹⁸¹

The administration has also taken initial and long overdue steps to modernize the U.S. nuclear deterrent – which includes the nuclear triad and associated nuclear command, control, and communications (NC3) systems.

In summary, the administration has made significant initial progress over the last two years to address America's readiness crisis, but much work remains. The continued progress American security requires depends on Congress' ability to provide sufficient, timely, and predictable funding.

The administration's record with respect to alliances is more mixed. NATO's military readiness is better today than it was two years ago. However, potential adversaries assess not only NATO's military capacity but also its political will to respond to aggression. Periodic statements by President Trump have undermined alliance cohesion and generated troubling doubts about U.S. willingness to fulfill its Article 5 collective defense commitment. As Secretary Mattis' resignation letter suggests, America's alliances are a key U.S. grand strategic asset that must be nurtured – rather than a burden to be abandoned.¹⁸² A failure by the president to demonstrate an unambiguous and consistent commitment to allies will increase the chances that America's men and women in uniform will be called upon to respond to unprovoked aggression. ■

A failure by the president to demonstrate an unambiguous and consistent commitment to allies will increase the chances that America's men and women in uniform will be called upon to respond to unprovoked aggression.

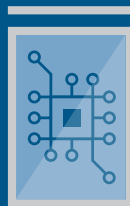
RECOMMENDATIONS | DEFENSE

- 1 Ensure sufficient, sustained, and timely funding for the Defense Department.** Consistent with the National Defense Strategy Commission's recommendations, the administration should seek at least 3 to 5 percent annual real growth in the Defense Department's budget for the next five years.¹⁸³ The passage of the defense authorization and appropriations bills before the end of the fiscal year must not be an anomaly.
- 2 Continue the National Defense Strategy's readiness and business practice lines of effort.** The National Defense Strategy's lines of effort related to restoring U.S. military readiness and lethality, as well as reforming Department of Defense business practices, must continue. The Defense Department should prioritize continued progress related to financial responsibility to wisely spend tax dollars and help justify the increased defense budgets that U.S. national security requires.
- 3 Focus more on China and Russia without losing sight of other key threats.** While the Department of Defense's focus on great power competition is warranted, thwarting future terrorist attacks on the U.S. homeland requires sustained whole-of-government pressure on jihadist networks overseas – depriving them of the safe havens to plan and launch large-scale attacks. Shifting finite resources to great power competition – while avoiding large-scale terrorist attacks on our homeland – will require the U.S. to continue the Defense Department's carefully monitored and prudently implemented economy of force operations in the broader Middle East that support and keep faith with allies who have demonstrated a willingness to fight common enemies.
- 4 Avoid premature withdrawals.** A premature calendar-based withdrawal of U.S. military forces from Afghanistan and Syria would forfeit hard-won military gains, empower U.S. adversaries, endanger Americans, and increase the likelihood that U.S. forces will need to return in the future, and at greater cost.
- 5 Strengthen America's alliances.** All administration leaders, including the commander-in-chief, should reiterate America's ability and will to defend its allies and honor U.S. treaty obligations. The Department of Defense should continue to expand alliance military readiness, capacity, and capability. The administration should continue to press allies to spend the necessary amounts on defense but not undermine alliance cohesion and credibility in the process.
- 6 Expand efforts to secure and strengthen America's national security innovation and industrial base.** Great power competitors have engaged in a systematic campaign of cyber theft and intrusion that targets American defense technology – undercutting America's military superiority. As the Department of Defense seeks to field more innovative weapons more quickly, it must simultaneously redouble efforts with private industry and interagency partners to make it more difficult for adversaries to steal American defense innovations. This challenge extends well beyond the Defense Department and will require leadership from the White House and National Security Council.
- 7 Prioritize nuclear modernization efforts to ensure a credible and reliable nuclear triad and deterrent.** The Department of Defense is right to consider this our highest national security priority, but it must better explain to the American people the consequences of a failure to modernize our nuclear deterrent.
- 8 Ensure freedom of navigation.** To protect maritime routes vital to U.S. economic and security interests, the administration should expand freedom of navigation patrols in the South China Sea and Persian Gulf – seeking to make them multilateral where possible.
- 9 Ensure missile defense capabilities.** The administration should expand efforts to increase the reliability, capability, and capacity of the Defense Department's missile defense systems.
- 10 Improve the readiness of the United States and its allies to respond to gray-zone aggression.** Competitors are using “economic coercion, political influence, criminal activity, military posturing, unconventional warfare, and information and cyber operations.”¹⁸⁴ The United States, working with our allies, must develop more agile and effective responses.



CYBER

Annie Fixler and David Maxwell



ABOVE: Cyber warfare operators serving with the 175th Cyberspace Operations Group of the Maryland Air National Guard on December 2, 2017 at Warfield Air National Guard Base in Middle River, Maryland. (U.S. Air Force photo by J.M. Eddins Jr.)

RIGHT: Tom Bossert, former White House homeland security advisor, briefs reporters about the WannaCry cyberattack. (Photo by Mark Wilson/Getty Images)

CURRENT POLICY | CYBER

The Trump administration's cyber policy is moving away from the prioritization of law enforcement to an approach that balances law enforcement, persistent engagement with adversaries in cyberspace, and the pursuit of deterrence. The most significant expression of this shift is the administration's September 2018 National Cyber Strategy, according to which the U.S. government will "identify, counter, disrupt, degrade, and deter behavior in cyberspace that is destabilizing and contrary to national interests, while preserving United States overmatch in and through cyberspace."¹⁸⁵

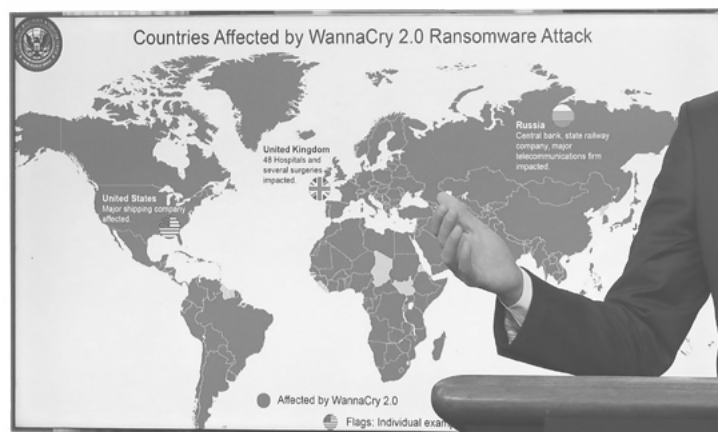
The Trump administration inherited a cyber policy based on Presidential Policy Directive 20 (PPD-20) of January 2013. An unclassified White House summary of the directive explained, "It is our policy that we shall undertake the *least action necessary to mitigate threats* and that we will *prioritize network defense and law enforcement* as preferred courses of action" (emphasis added).¹⁸⁶

During President Trump's tenure, senior U.S. officials have issued blunt assessments of the previous administration's approach. General Joseph Votel, commander of U.S. Central Command, noted that at the operational level, the approval process can be "so cumbersome that these capabilities are narrowly irrelevant."¹⁸⁷ Similarly, Admiral Mike Rogers, then serving as National Security Agency director and commander of U.S. Cyber Command (CYBERCOM), testified before Congress in February 2018 that U.S. cyber capabilities were "not optimized for speed and agility." Moreover, he stated, U.S. adversaries are "more emboldened" because they do not believe they will suffer significant consequences for their actions.¹⁸⁸ Incoming National Security Agency and CYBERCOM head General Paul Nakasone similarly testified a few days later, "We need to impose costs on our adversaries to ensure mission success by persistent delivery of cyberspace effects."¹⁸⁹

The Trump administration appears to have taken these critiques and recommendations to heart. In May 2017, the president signed an executive order requiring departments to work with the private sector to support critical infrastructure security. Seven months later, in its first National Security Strategy, the administration pledged to impose "swift and costly consequences" on malicious cyber actors, and explicitly noted the danger of adversarial cyber-enabled economic warfare.¹⁹⁰

Meanwhile, the Department of Defense's September 2018 Defense Cyber Strategy stated the department will "deter malicious cyber activities," "persistently contest malicious cyber activity in day-to-day competition," and "defend forward to disrupt or halt malicious cyber activity at its source."¹⁹¹ Simultaneously, the administration provided new authorities for offensive cyber operations and rescinded PPD-20.¹⁹²

The shift away from the old approach has begun, but implementing the new strategy across all agencies and departments of the federal government will require a sustained effort. For now, the administration continues to rely primarily on sanctions and indictments to impose costs on malicious cyber actors. Over the past two years and coinciding with complementary Department of the Treasury sanctions, the Department of Justice has unsealed indictments against dozens of Chinese, Russian, Iranian, and North Korean intelligence operatives and hackers. In some cases, the Justice Department accused these governments of sponsoring the operations. However, since these operatives are usually beyond the physical reach of U.S. law enforcement, the indictments have rarely led to arrests.¹⁹³ ■



ASSESSMENT | CYBER

The Trump administration has sensibly moved to broaden U.S. cyber policy beyond its previous emphasis on law enforcement actions, which have, at best, an unclear effect on hostile nation-state decision-makers who sponsor and authorize operations. In support of a robust cyber strategy, however, sanctions and law enforcement activities do expose the extent of malicious cyber activity. According to former Assistant Attorney General John Carlin, the indictments themselves also “rais[e] the cost of an attack by promoting vigilance against a named attacker.”¹⁹⁴

The uptick in indictments and sanctions has also corresponded with a more creative use of government authorities to punish those responsible for, or benefiting from, malicious cyber activity and to harden federal and civilian infrastructure. The Department of Homeland Security issued a Binding Operational Directive in September 2017 requiring federal agencies to remove all of Russia’s Kaspersky Lab products from their systems over concerns that Moscow uses the company to infiltrate U.S. networks.¹⁹⁵ Congress then passed bills banning the government from using Kaspersky products and from procuring goods that use Chinese telecommunications equipment as essential components. The Department of Commerce broadened the pressure on China over intellectual property theft by banning all U.S. exports to semiconductor producer Fujian Jinhua Integrated Circuits, who was responsible for stealing trade secrets from Idaho-based Micron Technology, which produces critical computer components for American cyber, national, and economic security.

The Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States (CFIUS) meanwhile blocked a merger between American and Singaporean companies over concerns that this would harm U.S. innovation in 5G service and allow companies with connections to the Chinese military and intelligence to create the equipment underpinning next generation internet technology. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) also prohibited federal subsidies for broadband providers that use Huawei equipment. The Trump administration has wisely shared its concerns about Huawei with allies who have begun issuing their own warnings about the company and excluding it from projects.

While it is too early to assess the effectiveness of the Trump administration’s new National Cyber Strategy, the document has received rare bipartisan praise. The new approach has the potential to be an effective, proactive strategy accompanied by new offensive authorities. Former National Security Council Cybersecurity Coordinator Rob Joyce – whose departure from the National Security Council caused lawmakers and experts to raise concerns that the White House lacked sufficient cyber expertise – called the replacement of PPD-20 “a thoughtful rewrite.”¹⁹⁶ In October 2018, CYBERCOM reportedly launched its first operation under these new authorities, alerting Russian cyber operatives that the U.S. military was tracking their activities to deter Moscow from interfering in the midterm elections.¹⁹⁷

While it is too early to assess the effectiveness of the Trump administration’s new National Cyber Strategy, the document has received rare bipartisan praise. The new approach has the potential to be an effective, proactive strategy accompanied by new offensive authorities.

The Trump administration has also been more forward leaning in its public attribution of cyberattacks, including working with its allies to call out Russia for the 2017 notPetya malware and North Korea for the 2017 Wannacry ransomware attacks. These public statements are important for correcting misconceptions about the inability to positively attribute cyberattacks, and as a first step to imposing consequences.

One urgent issue to address is the president’s refusal to consistently accept the U.S. intelligence community’s assessments of Russian cyber operations during the 2016 presidential election. The politicization of the investigation into Russia’s cyberattacks and cyber-enabled information operations undermines the bipartisanship necessary to implement effective responses to cyber vulnerabilities not only in U.S. election systems, but across all critical infrastructure. ■

RECOMMENDATIONS | CYBER

- 1 Target those responsible for, or benefiting from, malicious cyber operations.** The Trump administration should continue to sanction and disable the financial and business networks supporting malicious cyber operations. It should work with foreign partners to dismantle malicious, third party networks within their jurisdictions by sharing information about front companies involved in state-backed cyber operations. Similarly, the administration should create a watch list of software companies it believes are acting on behalf of, or being exploited by, adversarial states in ways that pose a national security risk. It should also produce a public list of foreign companies that use cyber infiltrations and other means to steal U.S. intellectual property or have benefited from the use of stolen intellectual property.
- 2 Excise components from authoritarian states engaged in malicious cyber operations from U.S. and allied supply chains.** In conjunction with like-minded nations, the Trump administration should create a consortium aimed at identifying potentially nefarious software or hardware providers; circulate confidential red notices on foreign software and hardware of concern; and develop alternative and more secure information technology supply chains that exclude companies from authoritarian states engaged in malicious cyber activity.
- 3 Synchronize cyber defense capabilities and offensive options with allies.** In conjunction with U.S. allies, the Trump administration should develop a joint R&D agenda to address common threats; create a joint cyber intelligence center focused on detection of cyber threats and intelligence sharing about cyber anomalies; and create cyber task forces to synchronize defenses and options for offensive operations and to resolve constraints that nations will face in the event of a joint “hot” cyber conflict. Likewise, America should conduct joint cyber war games to demonstrate international resolve and to build and test interoperability with allies. It should also declare that the United States will respond to and defend its allies against significant cyber campaigns.
- 4 Use cyber and kinetic capabilities to impose costs on adversaries.** The Trump administration should prepare offensive measures to restrict adversarial cyber operations and disrupt network infrastructure; use cyber-enabled information warfare capabilities to exploit and sharpen divisions between hostile authoritarian regimes and their oppressed populations; hold at risk assets of value to nations that engage in cyberattacks; and develop a suite of forward-leaning kinetic and non-kinetic options to impose overwhelming costs on those responsible for malicious cyber operations. In these endeavors, the administration should work closely with the congressionally mandated Cyberspace Solarium Commission, created to redress a lack of rigorous strategic thinking and interagency coordination of cyber policy.
- 5 Create secure partnerships and interoperability with the private sector.** The Trump administration should form secure and trusted partnerships between the intelligence community and private sector to collect and disseminate (with proper source protection) information about threats; share specific, actionable information with the private sector; and advance interoperability, through joint training and exercises, to enable industry to better defend itself.
- 6 Recruit private sector support for U.S. national security goals.** The Trump administration should dissuade U.S. technology firms from providing authoritarian governments the means to facilitate censorship and oppression. Rather, it should encourage them to work with the U.S. national security establishment to aid the defense of the nation. Washington should also incentivize companies to publicize breaches so that it can accurately assess the scope of damage from cyberattacks. Finally, the administration should regularly communicate with the public about cyber threats to foster individual citizen resilience.



ECONOMIC SECURITY

Juan C. Zarate



ABOVE: Traders on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange on the evening of November 7, 2018 in New York City. (Photo by Alex Wroblewski/Getty Images)

RIGHT: Joined by members of his cabinet and employees from the office of the U.S. Trade Representative, U.S. President Donald Trump speaks during a press conference to discuss a revised U.S. trade agreement with Mexico and Canada on October 1, 2018 in the Rose Garden of the White House. (Photo by Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images)

CURRENT POLICY | ECONOMIC SECURITY

The Trump administration has pursued a series of national economic security policies that recognize and address the growing convergence of economics and security. From the start, the administration has made clear that “economic security is national security.”¹⁹⁸

This premise has translated into an aggressive approach to prioritizing American economic interests in light of growing competition between great powers, as described in the 2017 National Security Strategy. Specifically, the administration’s approach reflects the president’s suspicion of existing trade agreements and a challenge to the orthodoxy that greater economic integration globally is necessarily beneficial to U.S. interests. The administration has also demonstrated its willingness to act unilaterally and aggressively, and to, in blunt strokes, use a variety of trade, regulatory, enforcement, and economic tools against all actors, including U.S. allies. In particular, it has confronted China directly about a wide spectrum of perceived threats to U.S. interests, from trade inequities and manufacturing chokepoints to cyber-enabled economic warfare and the theft and forced transfer of intellectual property.

Reflecting the president’s suspicion of major trade agreements, the administration withdrew from, or demanded renegotiation of, existing deals, such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPP), and the South Korean free trade agreement (KORUS). It also imposed tariffs – often citing “national security” reasons and exemptions – on foreign goods, including from Canada, Europe, and Asia. The most intense trade battle has emerged with China, with escalating tariffs and threats of more restrictions and regulatory or enforcement actions for unfair and imbalanced Chinese trade practices.

The administration has also sought to defend American economic interests, technology, and intellectual property by mandating broader investment protections, imposing export controls, and encouraging collaboration with the private sector. In particular, the administration

has prioritized the protection of the technology and manufacturing sectors that it considers crucial to U.S. innovation, economic development, and national security.

Like its predecessors, the Trump administration has continued the aggressive use of financial and economic tools of coercion – especially sanctions – to target and isolate rogue actors (state and non-state) from the global economic and financial system. In its first two years, the administration often employed sanctions unilaterally, as illustrated by its withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal and snapback of prior sanctions; the aggressive implementation of North Korean-related sanctions, including against Chinese actors; and the expansion of existing authorities to address human rights violations, corruption, cyber threats, and other diplomatic hotspots (like Venezuela and Nicaragua). In 2018 alone, the administration added almost 1,500 names to the Specially Designated Nationals list administered by the Treasury Department’s Office of Foreign Assets Control.

The administration has also ensured that its actions – in particular against Iran, North Korea, and Venezuela – underscore the inherent illicit financing risks associated with doing business in and through those countries, especially with their governments. Sanctions, advisories, and indictments have all been used to target suspect actors and draw attention to financial security concerns.

Finally, the administration took an important step to leverage America’s positive economic power when President Trump signed the Better Utilization of Investment Leading to Development (BUILD) Act, which passed with wide bipartisan support in the House and Senate. The act modernizes U.S. development finance and improves the government’s ability to deploy incentives to address the increasingly important need for alternatives to China’s aggressive state-lending model. The intent of this new legislation is to catalyze flows of private capital to build robust private sectors in higher-risk developing countries while providing new opportunities for the U.S. private sector and supporting U.S. national security goals. ■



ASSESSMENT | ECONOMIC SECURITY

The Trump administration has woven together the beginnings of a national economic security policy by focusing in the first instance on defending American economic prosperity and interests, and by using a variety of coercive tools to reshape the geo-economic landscape. Often, the specific measures have been seen as harsh and blunt – lacking concern for allied interests or long-term effects, and often leveraged without a coordinated strategy or concern for negative externalities.

The administration's aggressive trade agenda has, in some cases, resulted in new trade deals with allies, notably the renegotiated NAFTA (now the United States, Mexico, Canada Agreement, or USMCA), and a revised U.S.-Korea free trade deal. In USMCA, the parties agreed that any new trade deal with a non-market economy (China) could lead to the termination of USMCA.¹⁹⁹ The administration also secured an agreement in principle from the European Union for freer, fairer, and more reciprocal trade. Despite its withdrawal from TPP, the administration has tried to increase economic cooperation with countries in the Indo-Pacific, focusing on streamlining high-tech exports to India, and enhancing energy cooperation to expand the market for U.S. exports.²⁰⁰

The administration's approach to China reflects both the president's emphasis on reducing the U.S.-China trade deficit, as well as widely shared concerns about China's predatory economic behavior. This behavior includes cyber-enabled and traditional economic espionage, unfair licensing practices, forced technology transfers, and joint venture requirements for U.S. companies seeking access to the Chinese market. The administration has levied tariffs on \$250 billion in Chinese imports to the U.S., yet Beijing has not yet agreed to, or implemented, wide-ranging policy changes such as opening up its markets or halting its relentless efforts to steal intellectual property.

Greater clarity has come from U.S. legislation to protect America's technological and manufacturing bases from China's aggressive efforts to acquire American technology and intellectual property (IP). The Export Control Reform Act (ECRA) expands the scope

of technology under U.S. export control jurisdiction to include “emerging and foundational technologies.”²⁰¹ Meanwhile, the Foreign Investment Risk Review Modernization Act (FIRRMA) expands the jurisdiction and powers of the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States' (CFIUS) national security review process by increasing the scope of “covered transactions” subject to mandatory review.²⁰² Even before FIRRMA was signed, the administration had begun scrutinizing investments in the United States regarding sensitive technology, as seen in the intervention to block the proposed Broadcom/Qualcomm acquisition.

Through the use of coercive tools, the administration has exerted pressure effectively on rogue state adversaries.

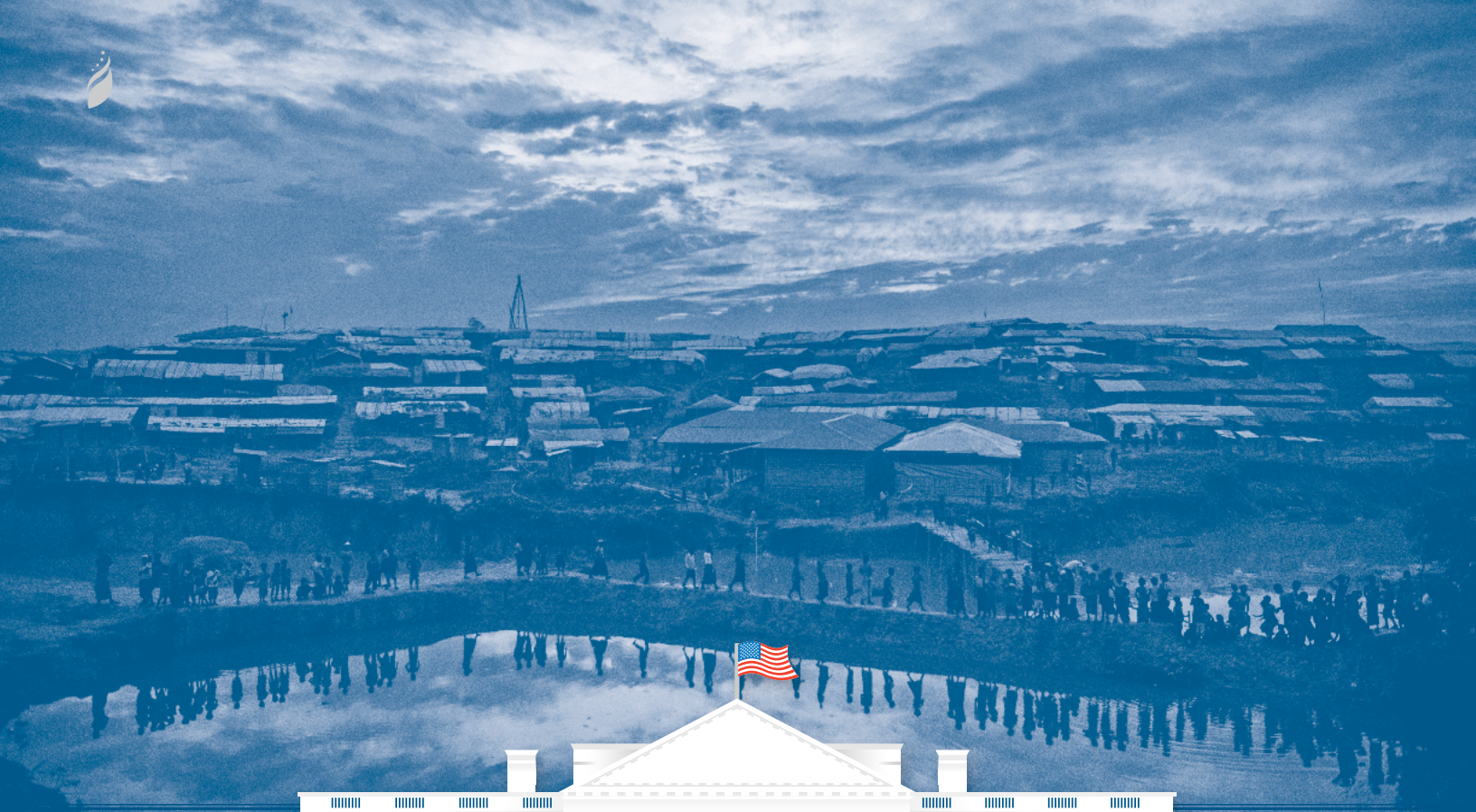
Through the use of coercive tools, the administration has exerted pressure effectively on rogue state adversaries. The return of sanctions on Iran has severely weakened Tehran's currency while driving up inflation. Sanctions and indictments against Venezuelan officials have revealed not only widespread corruption in the Maduro regime, but also its close ties to, and at times active participation in, narcotics trafficking. Four successive UN Security Council resolutions advanced Washington's “maximum pressure” campaign against North Korea, which may have put pressure on Kim Jong Un to cease provocations such as missile launches. Russia and Hezbollah have also found themselves in the crosshairs of additional U.S. sanctions.

Finally, the implementation of the Global Magnitsky Act represents a significant milestone in the use and expansion of conduct-based sanctions, enabling the U.S. to target corruption and human rights abuse globally. Targets to date include the former president of Gambia, numerous Nicaraguan officials, two Turkish cabinet ministers, Burmese commanders involved in the ethnic cleansing of Rohingya Muslims, and 17 Saudi officials involved in the murder of Jamal Khashoggi. ■

RECOMMENDATIONS | ECONOMIC SECURITY

To establish an effective and sustainable national economic security policy, the administration must develop a more strategic, nuanced, and multilateral approach that builds on steps already taken.

- 1 Coordinate and prioritize an economic security strategy.** The Trump administration needs to choreograph and coordinate the implementation of an overarching national economic security strategy with allies and the private sector, incorporating all existing authorities and tools.
- 2 Resolve disputes with friends and shift the focus to China.** The administration's "America First" economic policy comes at a time when all Western economies are grappling with China's alternative economic security model. When a major global economy does not subscribe neatly to existing international rules and norms, it challenges all nations that do. With this in mind, the Trump administration should calibrate and resolve trade disputes with allies to allow for a collective focus on Chinese challenges – and revisit reentry into the TPP with a sharper eye toward reinforcing U.S. national economic security goals multilaterally.
- 3 Develop trade negotiations with a clear priority to protect U.S. intellectual property, defense of the U.S. innovation base, and access and opportunities for U.S. companies and interests in foreign markets.** The focus of all negotiations should be on defending American interests against explicit economic attacks. This includes defending against Chinese cyber-enabled economic warfare and ensuring China is not able to engage in trade arbitrage that undercuts controls.
- 4 Define the boundaries of state intervention.** Protecting U.S. national economic security requires government intervention in the marketplace, which limits the freedom of the private sector. To the extent that the U.S. government begins to block or exclude investments under CFIUS, impose tariffs for "national security reasons," or support private actors' efforts to access new markets, it will need to define clearly the rules of the road. This should include clear definitions of how the U.S. government will intervene in mergers, acquisitions, and investments in sensitive or critical U.S. technology, supplies, and manufacturing – including with early-stage investments.
- 5 Use sanctions selectively.** Sanctions programs and financial tools of exclusion must be used selectively as an asymmetric tool of value, focused on underlying illicit or nefarious conduct, which justifies such isolation. The U.S. should ensure that such steps – even if unilateral – serve to reinforce international norms and requirements, rather than becoming solely tools of punishment that advance U.S. interests. This will help drive cooperation with allies and compliance in the private sector.
- 6 Forge defensive economic security alliances.** The administration should encourage our allies to coordinate their efforts to review and vet Chinese investment in key technologies, such as telecommunications, artificial intelligence, and quantum computing. This is already happening in part with evaluations and withdrawal of deals involving Chinese telecom giant Huawei. Cyber defense and supply-chain security should be top priorities.
- 7 Forge positive economic security alliances.** The U.S. government should coordinate with key allies to ensure investment in critical countries and on projects that are important to U.S. national economic security goals. This might include targeted investment in countries already influenced by China, Russia, North Korea, or Iran. There should also be a complementary CFIUS process that qualifies appropriate investment from around the world for preferred access to sensitive projects or technologies. This process should unlock and catalyze new capital, including from allied sovereign wealth funds.
- 8 Engage the private sector.** The administration must coordinate and cooperate with the private sector, including critical infrastructure firms, technology companies, and the investor community. This should involve sharing information dynamically and actively defending against state actors trying to steal intellectual property, disrupt business operations, and exert destructive economic influence against American interests.



HUMAN RIGHTS

Saeed Ghasseminejad and Tzvi Kahn



ABOVE: Rohingya refugees are seen at the Kutupalong Refugee Camp on October 31, 2017 near Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. (Photo by Kevin Frayer/Getty Images)

RIGHT: A woman raises her arms in protest in Tehran, Iran. (Photo by Getty Images)

CURRENT POLICY | HUMAN RIGHTS

“From this moment on, it’s going to be America First,” President Trump said in his inaugural address. “Every decision on trade, on taxes, on immigration, on foreign affairs, will be made to benefit American workers and American families.”²⁰³ For the president, an “America First” foreign policy prioritizes the pursuit of security and material benefits for America rather than the advancement of American values. Thus, Trump has not made the defense of human rights an overarching goal of his administration.

To its credit, the Trump administration has drawn attention to human rights concerns primarily as part of its broader campaigns to pressure rogue adversaries such as North Korea, Iran, Cuba, and Venezuela. The administration has recognized that the repressive nature of these regimes threatens their legitimacy both at home and abroad. In the case of Iran, the administration has sanctioned 19 individuals and entities responsible for human rights violations, while Secretary of State Mike Pompeo declared in May 2018 that the United States would “advocate tirelessly for the Iranian people.”²⁰⁴

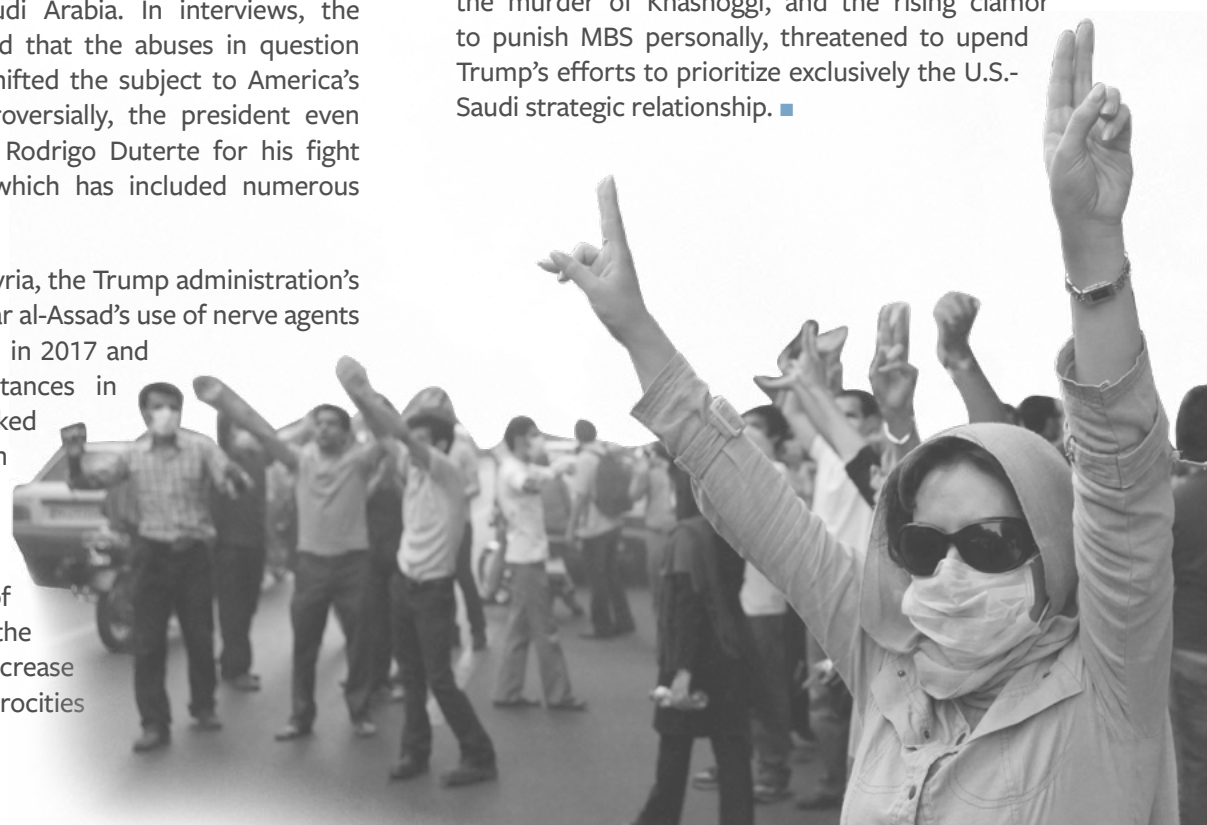
The president has faced more difficult questions about human rights abuses perpetrated by dictatorships with whom the White House seeks improved relationships, especially Russia and Saudi Arabia. In interviews, the president has often denied that the abuses in question took place, or has even shifted the subject to America’s own moral failings. Controversially, the president even praised Filipino President Rodrigo Duterte for his fight against drug trafficking, which has included numerous extrajudicial killings.²⁰⁵

In the unusual case of Syria, the Trump administration’s military responses to Bashar al-Assad’s use of nerve agents against his own population in 2017 and 2018 represent rare instances in which Washington invoked universal values in addition to American interests as a key justification for his action. However, Trump’s planned withdrawal of U.S. troops from Syria in the coming months may increase prospects for further atrocities

against the Syrian people by the Assad regime, Iran, Russia, and terrorist groups like the Islamic State.

The Trump administration’s approach to human rights appears to fall within the broad confines of the foreign policy school of realism. This tradition emphasizes the centrality of states and power to international relations, a premise often leading to the conclusion that the pursuit of idealistic causes can prove impractical or counterproductive. To that end, states should form partnerships based primarily on mutual interests rather than shared democratic values. To be sure, realism comes in many varieties, and self-described realists have been among the administration’s most vocal critics. Yet the president’s instincts on human rights have a decidedly realist character.

So far, the greatest test of Trump’s approach to human rights has stemmed from the revelation of Saudi Arabia’s responsibility for the murder of Jamal Khashoggi, best known for his *Washington Post* columns critical of the kingdom. During the first 20 months of his presidency, Trump worked to repair the U.S. relationship with Riyadh – and especially Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, or MBS – to build a Sunni Arab coalition against Iran, their mutual foe. Yet the bipartisan backlash against Riyadh for the murder of Khashoggi, and the rising clamor to punish MBS personally, threatened to upend Trump’s efforts to prioritize exclusively the U.S.-Saudi strategic relationship. ■



ASSESSMENT | HUMAN RIGHTS

Even the most robust human rights policy will always fall short of its ideals. The United States will invariably have to make difficult decisions about when to confront allies about their abusive behavior and when to remain quiet. Yet President Trump's double standards and resistance to evidence risk undermining his administration's credibility on human rights while worsening partisan divides on an issue that should unify political opponents.

President Trump's double standards and resistance to evidence risk undermining his administration's credibility on human rights while worsening partisan divides on an issue that should unify political opponents.

A refusal to tell the truth about human rights violations contributes to the impunity of their perpetrators. Barely two weeks after taking office, Trump responded to an interviewer's contention that Russian President Vladimir Putin "is a killer" by insisting, "There are a lot of killers. Do you think our country is innocent?"²⁰⁶ The remark combined a willful disregard for evidence with a moral relativism that undermines American leadership. Trump's comments also sowed division at home on a politically sensitive issue.

Nonetheless, an administration should not remain silent on human rights just because its credibility is impaired. The administration's efforts to publicize the crimes committed by Iran, Cuba, Syria, Venezuela, and others still serve a valuable purpose, because the crimes are real and their victims still look to the United States as one of their few remaining hopes for aid. If anything, the president should be more vocal about some of the atrocities that his government has rarely addressed, especially the mass detention of China's Uighur minority and the ethnic cleansing of Burma's Rohingya people.

It is also essential to maintain a focus on human rights when America begins moving toward reconciliation with adversaries such as North Korea. The president rightfully condemned Kim Jong Un's atrocities during the "maximum pressure" phase of his administration's policy, including the incarceration and death of American college student

Otto Warmbier. However, Trump no longer seems willing to raise the issue. Since then, in fact, he has said that he "fell in love" with Kim Jong Un, and that the North Korean leader "loves his people."²⁰⁷ Rather than praise the ruler of a gulag regime, the administration should continue to raise human rights concerns directly and seek relief for North Korea's long-suffering population even as nuclear negotiations continue.

Likewise, the president should prioritize human rights concerns in bilateral relationships with partners who fall short of expectations – the most pressing case being Saudi Arabia. In that regard, he was right to approve sanctions, pursuant to the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act, on 17 Saudis who played a role in the Khashoggi murder.²⁰⁸ However, the president continues to damage his administration's credibility with evasive and misleading statements about the crown prince's likely foreknowledge of the murder. Rather than quelling the furor, such statements have stoked bipartisan anger in Congress.

America's complicated relationship with Saudi Arabia underscores why perfect consistency is never possible when dealing with human rights. The United States will continue to rely on Sunni Arab regimes to counter Iran, ensure the unhindered flow of oil, house its military bases, and combat terrorist organizations like al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. Washington cannot seek to isolate a flawed friend like Saudi Arabia the way it does an avowed enemy regime like Iran's Islamic Republic. Yet balancing pressure on human rights with the pursuit of other strategic objectives does not require a wholesale abandonment of human rights as a matter of principle and policy.

In fact, pressing difficult allies to improve their conduct may enable Washington to salvage the overall relationships. Furthermore, unrestrained abuses may exacerbate threats to U.S. interests by fueling the conditions that have led anti-American regimes to emerge in the first place. As recently named U.S. Special Envoy to Venezuela Elliott Abrams writes, "The lesson is not that any existing [repressive] regime must be supported lest something worse arrive, but that without reform something worse eventually will, filling the space that regime collapse has created."²⁰⁹ ■

RECOMMENDATIONS | HUMAN RIGHTS

- 1 Reinvalidate America's role as a human rights leader.** Washington always retains an opportunity to repair U.S. credibility on this issue, because that credibility derives from the democratic principles Americans practice at home. Including human rights as an integral element of U.S. foreign policy would not undermine the administration's national security objectives, but would complement them instead.
- 2 Maintain a range of intermediate options to pressure authoritarian allies on human rights without sabotaging the overall relationship.** Partnerships with certain authoritarian states may be a strategic necessity, but the United States can still employ targeted sanctions, as well as private and/or public criticism, to address human rights violations.
- 3 Deliver a major address that explicitly enshrines human rights as a pillar of U.S. foreign policy.** While always maintaining a clear distinction between friend and foe, Trump should make clear that human rights concerns will be an important factor in shaping America's bilateral relationship with other countries.
- 4 Routinely use the bully pulpit to condemn major human rights abuses as they occur.** The administration's efforts on Iran provide a model for such an effort.
- 5 Use authorities provided by the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act to sanction individuals and entities responsible for serious human rights abuses and corruption around the world.** To date, the United States has imposed such sanctions against human rights abusers in Saudi Arabia, Russia, and China, among other countries. Washington should continue to use Magnitsky sanctions against human rights violators as circumstances warrant.



U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley holds up photos of victims of the Syrian chemical attack during a meeting of the United Nations Security Council at UN headquarters on April 5, 2017 in New York City. (Photo by Drew Angerer/Getty Images)



CONCLUSION

Clifford D. May

The president of the United States has no responsibility more imperative than this: to defend Americans from those intent on doing them harm.

What can we conclude about the current commander-in-chief’s national security policies halfway through his term? Based on the assessments of FDD’s researchers, I think it is clear that Trump deserves more credit than his Democratic and Republican #NeverTrump critics give him, but less than his most fervent fans – and the president himself – like to claim.

On the plus side, he has seemed not just willing, but eager, to confront America’s many enemies, adversaries and competitors, and to prevent them from making further advances. On the minus side, he has been mercurial, impulsive, and too quick to cast instances of modest progress as significant victories.

Most troubling was his decision, in the waning days of 2018, to call for the speedy withdrawal of all American forces from Syria. No preparations were made in advance. No speech or paper explained the president’s decisions, and no plans were prepared to mitigate foreseeable deleterious impacts, in particular on those who have relied on American support to fight our common enemies. In response, Defense Secretary James Mattis submitted his resignation.

Trump’s abrupt reversal on Syria reflects a broader retreat from his willingness to confront America’s enemies, an approach whose success confounded low expectations of Trump’s abilities as commander-in-chief. The withdrawal from Syria is a gift to Russia and Iran and may give the Islamic State a new lease on life. After calling for victory in Afghanistan, Trump is now weighing whether to pull out half of our troops while American generals implore the

Taliban to negotiate. Trump’s firm words for Kim Jong Un have given way to warmth and affection. The same goes for Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who holds American hostages to this day.

To appreciate the magnitude of Trump’s recent reversal, one must begin by contrasting his vigorous initial moves with the timidity of the previous administration. A year ago last month, there were reasons to believe President Trump was on track to achieve much more than had his predecessors. The White House had just delivered a National Security Strategy framed as “principled realism” – an attempt to “rethink the policies of the past two decades,”²²¹⁰ policies that had not produced the results intended or desired. The president’s actions reflected that goal.

In its first month in office, the Trump administration put Iran on notice that changes were coming. The most important one arrived in May 2018, when President Trump withdrew from the Iran nuclear deal, formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Concluded by President Obama without congressional approval, the deal aimed to slow, but not actually stop, Tehran’s nuclear weapons program. Trump’s re-imposition of significant sanctions on the clerical regime followed. Tehran’s currency is now in a tailspin and its economy headed into a deep recession while protests continue to challenge the regime.

American policy toward North Korea also took a new turn. In 1994, President Clinton concluded an accord that, like the JCPOA, was fundamentally flawed. Over the years since, the Pyongyang regime has gone on to develop as many as 60 nuclear weapons, and missiles that, given continuing development, could soon reach targets anywhere – the continental United States very much included. The dynastic and Stalinist Kim family regime has a long record of cooperating on missile technology with Iran.





President Obama’s policy toward North Korea was known as “strategic patience,” a diplomatic euphemism for doing nothing. President Trump, by contrast, took the initiative. At first, he threatened and insulted Kim Jong Un. His administration began to put in place a “maximum pressure” sanctions campaign that hit hundreds of targets left untouched by previous administrations. Despite expectations that Kim would escalate the conflict, the young tyrant suspended missile and nuclear tests while proposing the first-ever U.S.-North Korean summit.

The most notable success of Trump’s foreign policy, acknowledged on both sides of the aisle, has been his intensification of the campaign to eradicate the so-called “caliphate” that the Islamic State carved out of Iraq and Syria. Trump also pledged, “Our troops will fight to win” in Afghanistan, while warning, “We cannot repeat in Afghanistan the mistake our leaders made in Iraq,” where a rushed withdrawal led to the rise of the Islamic State.²¹¹

President Trump also deserves credit for beginning to rebuild the U.S. military, weakened by years of budget cuts, including under “sequestration” which prevented intelligent planning. Nevertheless, the military remains, woefully under-resourced if the goals are (1) deterrence, and (2) ensuring that American forces easily overmatch any enemy or combination of enemies. In particular, the U.S. must prepare to face constant pressure from China, whose rapid economic growth and innovative use of technology have fed its hegemonic and neo-imperialist ambitions.

For two decades, China’s Leninist-capitalist regime has been utilizing cyber weapons to steal hundreds of billions of dollars of American intellectual property. A recent FDD report estimates that Beijing is responsible for 50 to 80 percent of cross-border intellectual property

theft worldwide, and over 90 percent of cyber-enabled economic espionage in the United States.²¹² The U.S. has only begun to address the strategic threat from China, but no other administration has described the threat as bluntly or accurately.

Had President Trump continued to build on the tough approach he put in place during his first 16 months in office, his record at the halfway point of his first term might be genuinely extraordinary. Instead, there are numerous warning signs that impatience is getting the better of him.

After his summit with Kim Jong Un in Singapore, Trump began to talk about withdrawing U.S. troops from the Korean peninsula. His flattery of Kim continues, even though Pyongyang has made no substantial moves toward denuclearization.

The sudden call for a withdrawal from Syria threatens to unravel the gains made against both the Islamic State and Iran. Among Trump’s arguments for withdrawing from Syria (made in tweets and an improvised video): that the Islamic State has been defeated. In truth, an estimated 30,000 Islamic State fighters remain in Syria and Iraq. Once U.S. forces leave, this networked insurgency is likely to revive and rebuild under the leadership of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi whom the U.S. has not managed to track down and eliminate.

The removal of America’s military presence in Syria can only undermine the president’s strategy vis-à-vis Tehran. Once the U.S. forces decamp, Iran’s rulers will encounter few obstacles to their establishing a land bridge through Syria into Lebanon – a country now effectively ruled by Hezbollah, Tehran’s proxy – and on to the Mediterranean.



About 90 percent of Syria's oil lies under territory the U.S. has controlled. Those resources may soon replenish Bashar al-Assad's coffers, reducing the amount Iranian Ayatollah Ali Khamenei spends – an estimated \$16 billion annually – to prop up the mass-murdering dictator.

That will leave more money for terrorists and missiles that can deliver nuclear warheads. The financial pressure Trump has exerted on Tehran will weaken. The odds that the regime can wait out the next two years will increase.

Jordan and Iraq – nations in which the U.S. has made significant investments – will face additional peril. Israel will be under increased pressure, too.

Other beneficiaries of the withdrawal include Russian President Vladimir Putin and Turkey's Erdogan, the latter a supporter of the Muslim Brotherhood. By standing up to Erdogan, Trump had won the freedom of North Carolina Pastor Andrew Brunson, whom the Turkish strongman had taken hostage. Now, Trump seems to trust Erdogan's advice on Syria more than that of his own national security team, even though Erdogan holds additional U.S. hostages and is threatening to wage war on the Syrian Kurds, a loyal U.S. partner in the war against the Islamic State.

With regard to Putin, Trump has never faced up, at least publicly, to his bad intentions. True, the Trump administration has taken some firm measures with regard to Russia, including additional sanctions, the sale of weapons to Ukraine, and additional support for NATO. Yet giving Putin the benefit of one doubt after another is inexplicable.

There are now signs that Trump may also withdraw 7,000 troops from Afghanistan, about half of the total. In Afghanistan, the Taliban – which calls itself the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and is closely allied with al-Qaeda – said it had no intention of meeting with representatives from the Afghan government, and reportedly celebrated its imminent victory. Nonetheless, the administration remains committed to the illusionary hope of a negotiated peace.

It is hard to square Trump's recent moves with his own warnings not to repeat the strategic errors made by President Obama. Following the killing of Osama bin Laden in 2011, Obama prematurely declared victory over al-Qaeda. Today, al-Qaeda has a larger presence in more countries than ever. Its leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, is alive and well.

That same year, ignoring his national security advisors, Obama withdrew all U.S. troops from Iraq, opening its doors to Iran's rulers as well as the Islamic State. Obama went on to enrich and empower the ruling clerics in Tehran in exchange for a deal based more on trust than verification.

Also beginning in 2011, Obama decided to do next to nothing to assist those in Syria protesting the oppressive Assad dictatorship. Over the years since, half a million Syrian men, women and children have been killed, and refugees have flooded into Europe where their impact has been destabilizing, to put it mildly.

In Afghanistan, too, Obama's policies never achieved coherence or consistency. Perhaps most egregious, he announced in late 2009 a 30,000-troop surge, quickly adding that "after 18 months, our troops will begin to come home." In other words, he told the Taliban and al-Qaeda that if they would just hunker down for a while, they would be fine. So they did, and so they were.

The United States is engaged in what FDD has been calling The Long War. Much as we might like diplomatic solutions, our enemies get a vote. They are not interested in half loaves. They are keen to keep fighting. American retreats can only bolster their determination.

Sustaining a long and low-intensity conflict utilizing all instruments of American power is not a pleasant prospect. But if we continue to allow our enemies to strengthen, eventually we will face a stark choice: fighting high-intensity conflicts – with nuclear weapons targeting Americans at home – or watching from the sidelines as authoritarians dominate a radically transformed international order.

It is tempting to believe that we can make ourselves inoffensive to those who despise us; that we can appease them; that we can ignore quarrels in far-away countries; that our goal should be "peace for our time," "Peace now!" and "Ending Endless War." But those are illusions to which only weak horses cling.

In the real world, hard work and sacrifice will be required to make America great again. President Trump's National Security Strategy left no doubt about that. The commander-in-chief, as he contemplates the next two years, would be well advised to re-read it, along with the many thoughtful recommendations provided by my colleagues in this volume. ■

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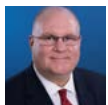
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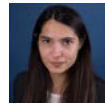
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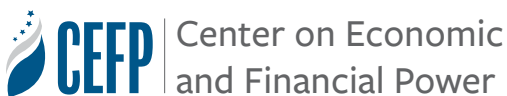


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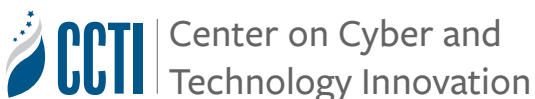
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CCTI seeks to advance U.S. prosperity and security through technology innovation while countering cyber threats that seek to diminish it. The Center promotes a greater understanding within the U.S. government, private sector, and allied countries of the threats and opportunities to national security posed by the rapidly expanding technological environment.



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