



Centre for Air Power Studies (CAPS)

Forum for National Security Studies (FNSS)

41/17

100 DAYS OF NUCLEAR ISSUES UNDER TRUMP PRESIDENCY

Hina Pandey
Associate Fellow, CAPS

On 29th April 2017, President Trump completed 100 days of his ascendancy to the White House. It is within these 100 days that President Trump has appointed important NSC members who are responsible for guiding the American security and foreign policy. Interestingly, a lot has happened in US domestic and foreign policy front since then. For instance, the US domestic politics witnessed the shortest tenure of the NSA in the American history, a number of Presidential executive orders were signed- one such resulted in the travel ban of nationals from Iran, Iraq, Libya, Syria etc., the US has withdrawn from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) –which could have been a promising economic arrangement for the region, and the proposal for a Mexican border wall are being debated financially.

Additionally, President Trump has also authorised the first military action of his tenure in Yemen, airstrikes in Syria, and recently approved the ‘Mother of All Bombs’ (MOAB-ing) in Afghanistan to sanitise Islamic State (IS)

Khorasan in Afghanistan. Moving on to the nuclear domain; three important issues have also received President Trump’s attention; they are- the US-Russia nuclear cooperation, North Korea’s nuclear capability buildup and the much talked about Iran deal. The Trump Administration has already set an uncompromising undertone for the aforementioned issues.

It is, for this reason, the 100 days analysis of the Trumps’ Presidency is worthy of interest. It is important to note that nothing significant on the nuclear issues has been laid out on nuclear matters- other than scrapping the JCPOA. Thus, the understanding of his nuclear policy remains a lot ambiguous. This should be understood with the caveat that President Trump has no prior experience in government and has demonstrated a flexible outlook on security and foreign policy issues, which was starkly different from his own party positions in many respects.¹ As an outsider to the government and new to nuclear policy/governance, his views and the kind of direction US nuclear policy might take in future,

1

becomes an interesting point of discussion. A brief analysis on these issues in the first 100 days is a significant starting point.

Iran

Despite all that has been said about the deal—recently the US certified that Iran had continued to comply with the 2015 nuclear framework agreement. The interagency review of the nuclear deal is underway for some time. The findings are awaited. Few days before completing 100 days, the US Department of State certified to US House Speaker Paul Ryan on April 18, 2017, that Iran is compliant to the commitments under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action.² However, some American media reports have confirmed that President Trump has expressed disagreement with the State Department and that the President has personally rebuked the certification letter, contending that “Iran is not living up to the spirit”³ of the nuclear deal. It can be argued that with the State Department’s certification, the Administration might be buying time to assess its action on the Iran deal. Further, the action is expected when the interagency review of the JCPOA will bring forth its final findings. In any case, the current US approach on Iran appears to be in confusion as, in the past three months, voices from within the Trump Administration have sent mixed signals on the nuclear deal. For instance, in the immediate transition period, President Trump’s team had examined proposals

for new non-nuclear sanctions on Iran, focusing on its ballistic missile developments or human right violations.⁴ In the subsequent days, new sanctions were imposed on Iran to punish its recent ballistic missile tests in February 2017. Additionally, while announcing the sanctions, the Administration also conveyed its resolve in responding with more sanctions in future, in case the provocations occur. Clearly, the intention was also to signal that the era of sanctions is not over yet.⁵ Around the same time, Vice President Pence commented in an interview to ABC news that White House was also deliberating whether the US would honour the Iran deal.⁶ A tougher tone on the issue was expressed previously by the Secretary of Defense, James Mattis and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson in their confirmation ceremony that additional areas are to be considered in the JCPOA to limit Iran’s ballistic missile developments in future.⁷

On the other hand, some subtle support on the JCPOA is also visible from within the administration especially if assessed in the context of the one year of successful implementation. Despite being a staunch critique of the deal, Mattis too is of opinion that “the United States must live up to its obligations and work with its allies” in keeping the deal.⁸ It is important here to recognise that nothing in the JCPOA prevents Iran’s ballistic missile tests, so long Iran continues to implement the deal in accordance with the JCPOA, the US cannot potentially harm the deal’s execution. However,

the continuous imposing sanctions on Iran might indirectly impact the execution of the deal as Iran's patience would be put to test continuously

New START

President Trump has already inherited a fragile relationship with Russia. It is in this setting that the both countries' nuclear commitments would have to operate. In the current setting, the prospects look bleak.

Already President Trump has denounced the New START treaty and called it as 'one of the bad deals negotiated by the Obama Administration' and conveyed it to President Vladimir Putin. It is apparent now that the Trump Administration is not interested in cooperating with Russia on the reduction of strategic arms, thus, making the future of the New START uncertain. The New START essentially enjoys an overwhelming support from the non-proliferation lobby in the US - including the country's leading national security leaders and military commanders.

Moreover, his approach towards nuclear capability buildup for the US aims at expanding the nuclear arsenal to seek nuclear dominancy. After taking office, he questioned the need for the New START treaty which has functioned well despite the US-Russia tensions due to the Ukrainian crisis. The New START treaty expired on 05 February 2012- and without a mutual agreement to extend its duration the New START

cannot be renewed. Additionally, a majority of Republicans oppose its ratification, their key point of criticism being that it favours Russian nuclear buildup. It should be noted here that Russia is already on a pathway to nuclear modernization.⁹ Considering the republican majority in the Congress and the very fact that any ratification of the New START would require a senate majority, the prospects of which does not look promising at the moment.

North Korea

On the North Korean issue, Vice-President Mike Pence had recently announced that the period of "strategic patience" was over. The country's pursuit of nuclear weapons is being viewed as a top foreign policy priority.¹⁰ In the recent days of deteriorating US-North Korean relations, it appeared that the bilateral tensions would flare up. However, many experts still argue that despite US naval fleets meandering the peninsular waters, the diplomatic talks would prevent the relations from escalating into a major military conflict. State Secretary Tillerson's statement too reiterated that the American goal would remain to bring North Korea back into negotiations. He had stated, the only way to prevent North Korea from possessing these capabilities is through 'negotiations'.¹¹ This is also to be read in conjunction with the recent election of South Korean President, who actually favours improvement of relations with the North.

Thus, even if the US decides (in future) for a military settlement of the nuclear threat emanating from Pyongyang, it would have to consider its important ally's position. For now, the longstanding position of South Korea seems to be changing after the new President's elections and it also stands in a stark contrast to the aggressive stand of the current American Administration. The change in the attitude of South Korea in this manner might limit the policy that the US would like to adopt towards the North.¹² In the same context, the engagement of North Korea than a military solution appears to be shaping up the practical approach in Washington.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes

¹ Xenia Wickett, (2017), Chatham House, *Executive Summary*, "America's International Role Under Donald Trump"(2017), *Chatham House*, Available at <https://reader.chathamhouse.org/americas-international-role-under-donald-trump#executive-summary>, Accessed on May 05, 2017.

² Rex Tillerson, *Press Statement*, US State Department, "Iran Continues To Sponsor Terrorism " , Available at <https://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2017/04/270315.htm>, Accessed on April 20, 2017 and Zack Beauchamp, (2017), "The Trump Administration Just Quietly Admitted That The Iran Deal Is Working" , *Vox*, April 19, 2017, Available at <https://www.vox.com/world/2017/4/19/15355726/trump-iran-deal-remaining>, Accessed on April 24, 2017 and Aleksandr S. Kolbin, Why the "nonproliferation complex" should help Donald Trump, *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, December 09, 2016, Available at <http://thebulletin.org/why-%E2%80%9Cnonproliferation-complex%E2%80%9D-should-help-donald-trump10273>, Accessed on December 15, 2016

³ Fred Fleitz, (2017), "On Iran, Trump Does The Right Thing And Rebukes The State Department 'Swamp'", *Fox News*, Available at <http://www.foxnews.com/opinion/2017/04/22/on-iran-trump-does-right-thing-and-rebukes-state-department-swamp.html>, Accessed on April 27, 2017.

⁴ Trump team considering new non-nuclear sanctions on Iran: *FT*, Available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-iran-idUSKBN13R1DE>, and Accessed on December 12, 2016.

⁵ David Sanger, (2017) "US Impose New Sanctions on Iran Over Missile Test", *New York Times*, February 03, 2017.

⁶ Ben Wolfgang, (2017), "Vice President Mike Pence: White House 'Evaluating' President Obama's Iran Nuclear Deal", *Washington Times*, Available at <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2017/feb/5/mike-pence-vice-president-white-house-evaluating-p/>, Accessed on May 02, 2017.

⁷ "James Mattis on Iran" (2017), *Iran Primer* , January 17, 2017, Available at <http://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2017/jan/17/mattis-iran> , Accessed on May 02, 2017, and "Rex Tillerson on Iran", (2017), *Iran Primer*, January 12, 2017, Available at <http://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2017/jan/12/rex-tillerson-iran>, Accessed on May 02, 2017.

⁸ Note.9

⁹ Jacek Durkalec (2017), "Challenges to US-Russia Strategic Arms Control during the Trump Presidency", Available at <http://isnblog.ethz.ch/security/challenges-to-us-russia-strategic-arms-control-during-the-trump-presidency>, Accessed on May 12, 2017.

¹⁰ Merrit Kennedy, (2017), "Pence Tells North Korea: 'The Era Of Strategic Patience Is Over' ", *NPR*, Available at <http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/04/17/524316419/pence-tells-north-korea-the-era-of-strategic-patience-is-over>, Accessed on April 22, 2017.

¹¹ Jon Wolfsthal, (2017), "What War With North Korea Would Look Like", *Carnegie*, Available at http://carnegieendowment.org/2017/05/02/what-war-with-north-korea-would-look-like-pub-69830?mkt_tok=eyJpIjoiWlRneE5EaGtORFEyTURjeCIsInQiOiJYQ2pZVG5Cc1FQWRTbmRlZVZvSzRNRGEwek1kcVUjhaYzNuaEtCQU15VVRPQXZ6VFVFRdlRlSDB5cmNuZkZRemo5RGRoU3ZEVVdhQ09QV0lLU5XXC9ObINCWEFhOUhRN3Uzd04raUpqamFUUTBSWdG3MVZDMIV3Zk1ZUWNHAvQifQ%3D%3D, Accessed on May 12, 2017.

¹² Jennifer Williams, (2017), "South Korea Has a New President. He And Trump See North Korea Very, Very

Differently”, VOX, Available at <https://www.vox.com/world/2017/5/9/15583758/south-korea-president-election-trump-north-korea>, Accessed on May 09 2017.

