

MICHAEL FLYNN: PRO-RUSSIA AND FIXATED ON 'ISLAMIC EXTREMISM'

WASHINGTON: US President Donald Trump's national security adviser Michael Flynn, who resigned late Monday over his controversial contacts with Russia, is a former military intelligence chief who saw militant Islam as the main threat to global stability. The 58-year-old retired three-star general—a slim, energetic figure with sharp facial features—however had accommodating views on Russia and China, two countries that former president Barack Obama regarded as the main US strategic opponents.

During the 2016 presidential campaign Flynn was one of the few high-profile former military figures who advised candidate Trump, and was on the short list to be the Republican's vice presidential candidate. At the Republican convention that nominated Trump for president, Flynn delivered a fiery attack on Democrat Hillary Clinton, even leading the crowd in chants of "Lock her up!"

However Flynn's fate may have been sealed when

news reports surfaced over the weekend that he discussed US sanctions with Russia's ambassador weeks before Trump was sworn in as president, and just as then-president Barack Obama was ordering new actions against Moscow over its alleged interference in the US election. Obama had named Flynn to head of the Defense Intelligence Agency in 2012, but the retired general was forced out in less than two years amid a turbulent restructuring effort and clashes with his superiors.

Flynn's paid appearance at a 2015 dinner in Russia sitting next to Russian President Vladimir Putin especially raised eyebrows, as did his accommodating statements toward Moscow that suggested a readiness to accept Russia's seizure of Crimea and its support for embattled Syrian leader Bashar Al-Assad. "We beat Hitler because of our relationship with the Russians, so anybody that looks on it as anything but a relationship that's

required for mutual supporting interests, including ISIS, ... that's really where I'm at with Russia," he told the Washington Post in August. The main threat, in Flynn's view, was militant Islam. "We have a problem with radical Islamism and I actually think that we could work together with them against this enemy. They have a worse problem than we do," he told the Post.

Militant Islam 'metastasizing'

The son of a Rhode Island banker, Flynn had a professional army career mainly in intelligence units. In the 2000s he served in Iraq and then Afghanistan, where he became director of intelligence for coalition forces. After leaving the Defense Intelligence Agency, Flynn repeatedly criticized the Obama administration as inadequately focused on the Islamist threat. He even published a book titled: "The Field of Fight: How We Can Win the Global War Against Radical Islam and Its Allies." In his book Flynn argued that Muslim coun-

tries must be forced to recognize and stamp out radical Islamic beliefs, which he says are "metastasizing" around the world. "We're in a global war, facing an enemy alliance that runs from Pyongyang, North Korea, to Havana, Cuba, and Caracas, Venezuela," he wrote in the New York Post in July.

"Along the way, the alliance picks up radical Muslim countries and organizations such as Iran, Al-Qaeda, the Taliban and Islamic State." Like Trump, Flynn has also criticized US allies in NATO for not putting enough of their own effort and funding into the crucial western defense treaty. National security community critics warned that his one-dimensional views could upset well-established relationships that benefit the United States. They also questioned Flynn's willingness to take money from Russian government-backed groups, and his support for Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's harsh crackdown on dissent. —AFP

UN, TRUMP DENOUNCE NORTH KOREA; NO SIGN OF ANY ACTION

UNITED NATIONS: The UN Security Council denounced North Korea's weekend missile launch, urging members to "redouble efforts" to enforce sanctions against the reclusive state, but gave no indications of any action it might take. Pyongyang's test of the intermediate-range ballistic missile on Sunday was its first direct challenge to the international community since US President Donald Trump took office on Jan 20.

At a news conference on Monday, Trump said: "Obviously North Korea is a big, big problem and we will deal with that very strongly." Trump did not speak of any planned response but Washington's UN ambassador Nikki Haley said in a statement: "It is time to hold North Korea accountable—not with our words, but with our actions." She issued the statement after an emergency Security Council meeting on Monday that was called by the United States, Japan and South Korea to discuss the North's missile launch.

US, Japanese and South Korean military officials held a teleconference on Monday in which they condemned the launch as "a clear violation" of multiple Security Council resolutions. The United States "reaffirmed its ironclad security commitments" to South Korea and Japan, the Pentagon said. A South Korean official said the United States has planned to deploy "strategic assets" in upcoming annual military exercises with South Korea because of the increased threat from the North. The exercises usually start in March.

The official did not say what assets might be used. In the past, these have included B-2 bombers, F-22 stealth fighter jets and nuclear-powered submarines. In Beijing,

China's Foreign Ministry said it hoped that under present circumstance all countries could maintain restraint and not do anything to escalate the situation. "We urge all sides to adopt a responsible attitude and make their own efforts to jointly promote the appropriate resolution of the Korean Peninsula nuclear issue," ministry spokesman Geng Shuang told a daily news briefing.

China is North Korea's main ally and trading partner but is irritated by its repeated aggressive actions, although it rejects suggestions from the United States and others that it could be doing more to rein in its neighbor. North Korea rejected the UN Security Council's statement and said its missile development was for self-defense. "The various test fires conducted by DPRK for building up self-defense capabilities are, with no exception, self-defense measures to protect national sovereignty and the safety of the people against direct threats by hostile forces," Han Tae Song, the new ambassador of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) to the United Nations in Geneva, told a conference.

South Korea's intelligence agency estimates the solid-fuel missile launched by North Korea on Sunday has a range of more than 2,000 km, according to a lawmaker briefed by the agency. That would bring large parts of China, Taiwan, Japan and Russia within range. The North has tested missiles with a range of over 3,000 km in the past, but has said it is on the verge of testing an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), which could eventually threaten the continental United States, which is about 9,000 km from North Korea. — Reuters



LOS ANGELES: Foreign nationals are arrested during a targeted enforcement operation conducted by US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) aimed at immigration fugitives, re-entrants and at-large criminal aliens in Los Angeles. — AP

OVER 680 ARRESTED IN US IMMIGRATION RAIDS

RIGHTS GROUPS ALARMED

WASHINGTON: US immigration officers last week arrested more than 680 people in the country illegally, the homeland security chief said on Monday, in a broad enforcement action that alarmed immigrant rights groups. US Homeland Security Secretary John Kelly said the operations, conducted in at least a dozen states, were routine and consistent with regular operations carried out by US Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or ICE.

Immigrant rights advocates said the operations, which they describe as raids, were not business as usual, and were more sweeping than operations conducted during the administration of former Democratic President Barack Obama. Kelly said in a statement that 75 percent of the immigrants arrested have criminal records, ranging from homicide to driving under the influence of alcohol. He said the operation also targeted people who have violated immigration laws. Some had ignored final orders of deportation, according to ICE, the

agency responsible for immigrant arrests and deportations. Obama was criticized for being the "deporter in chief" after he deported over 400,000 people in 2012, more than any president in a single year.

In 2014, Obama's homeland security chief issued a memo directing agents to focus on deporting a narrow slice of immigrants, namely those who had recently entered the country or committed serious felonies. Immigrants who were arrested for driving under the influence of alcohol, for example, were treated as lower priorities for deportation. Republican President Donald Trump promised to deport 2 million to 3 million migrants with criminal records on taking office. At a news conference with Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau on Monday, Trump said his administration had "really done a great job" in its recent arrests of immigrants.

"We're actually taking people that are criminals, very, very, hardened criminals in some cases with a tremendous track record of abuse and

problems," Trump said. ICE said in a statement on Monday that the operations targeted immigrants in the Midwest, Los Angeles, New York, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia and San Antonio. The ICE statistics revealed regional differences in the profiles of the immigrants arrested. Of the 41 people arrested in New York City and surrounding areas, 93 percent had criminal convictions, while 45 percent of the 51 people arrested in the San Antonio, Texas area did.

Among the 190 people arrested in Georgia, North Carolina and South Carolina, were 17 people who had no criminal convictions or a prior order to leave the country, according to ICE. In a Jan 25 executive order, Trump broadened an Obama-era priority enforcement system for immigrants subject to removal from the United States. "Now it seems like anyone could be arrested," said Shiu-Ming Cheer, senior staff attorney at the National Immigration Law Center. "The level of fear and anxiety is much higher than I've ever seen it." — Reuters



PAJU: South Korean army K-55 self-propelled artillery vehicles move during the annual exercise in Paju, South Korea, near the border with North Korea yesterday. — AP

TRUMP'S WHITE HOUSE AND THE TAKEAWAYS

WASHINGTON: US President Donald Trump began his fourth week in the White House Monday by hosting Canadian leader Justin Trudeau and ended the day accepting the resignation of top aide Michael Flynn. The stunning departure of Flynn, Trump's national security advisor, was due to allegations the retired three star general discussed US sanctions strategy with Russia's ambassador Sergey Kislyak before taking office. Here are five takeaways from the day:

Flynn out

Flynn's resignation came late Monday after a day of speculation about his future, especially after the White House said Trump was "evaluating" his contacts with the Russian government. The top aide-whose past encounters with Russian President Vladimir Putin have already drawn criticism—was accused of discussing the Obama administration's election-hacking-related sanctions with Ambassador Sergey Kislyak. Flynn initially claimed he did not discuss sanctions, prompting Vice President Mike Pence to publicly come to his defense. But Flynn later admitted that he "inadvertently briefed" Pence with "incomplete information" about his calls with Kislyak. Trump named retired lieutenant general Joseph Kellogg, who was serving as a director on the Joint Chiefs of Staff, to be interim national security advisor.

The Situation (dining) Room

Social media posts of Trump and Shinzo Abe huddling with aides in a public dining room after North Korea's missile test raised questions about the US administration's handling of sensitive information. The conversation was captured on camera from close range by a member of Trump's Mar-a-Lago club in Palm Beach, Florida on Saturday. One caption of the now removed posts by Facebook user Richard DeAgazio

read: "The President receiving the news about the Missile incident from North Korea on Japan with the Prime Minister sitting next to him."

When the president is away from the White House, many crisis conversations take place in what is known as a Sensitive Compartmented Information Facility or SCIF—a facility normally out of bounds for individuals without security clearance. The White House said that Trump was briefed in such a room "prior to dinner" and that no sensitive information was shared at the table. "There is no one in that picture around him or whatever that isn't part of the US delegation or the Japanese delegation, they were reviewing the logistics for the press conference," said White House spokesman Sean Spicer.

Ivanka at the top table

Trump's daughter Ivanka got a plum spot at America's highest table, taking place next to the 45-year-old Canadian premier Trudeau at a White House meeting with the president, and businesswomen from both countries. The appearance by Ivanka, who opened the discussion after both leaders had spoken, comes amid questions over the separation of Trump family businesses from the official roles of the president and his relatives.

Trump is the first president in modern times to refuse to release his tax returns or divest from his business interests—choosing instead to put his sons in charge. Ivanka also has significant business interests that have become the focus of government ethics watchdogs. Trump last week tweeted that his daughter had been treated "so unfairly" by Nordstrom, an upscale department store chain that dropped her fashion brand, and a key Trump aide is facing possible investigation after pitching Ivanka's clothing on television. —AFP

CALIFORNIA CREWS RUSH TO FIX DAM

OROVILLE: Stormwaters receded on Monday behind the nation's tallest dam, in Northern California, as engineers raced to drain the rain-swollen reservoir and shore up a crumbling overflow channel before new storms sweep the region this week. Authorities said they had averted the immediate danger of a catastrophic failure - one capable of unleashing a wall of water three stories tall on towns below.

But evacuation orders for some 188,000 residents remained in effect indefinitely, Butte County Sheriff Kory Honea said at a midday news conference. The risk to those living in the Feather River valley below the Lake Oroville Dam, 65 miles north of Sacramento, was still being reviewed, he said. "We need to have time to make sure that before we allow people back into those areas it is safe to do so," Honea said.

Residents below the dam were ordered from their homes on Sunday when an emergency spillway that acts as an automatic overflow channel appeared on the brink of collapse from severe erosion during what is on track to be Northern California's wettest winter on record after years of drought. Environmental groups had warned for more than a decade that the dam's spillway was not safe. "Infrastructure is profoundly important, and in our complex society, whether it's electricity or gas or water or roads or bridges, there's a lot to be done," California Governor Jerry Brown told reporters during a news conference on Monday evening.

Brown on Monday sent a letter to US President Donald Trump requesting he issue an emergency declaration, which would open up federal assistance for the affected communities. Brown said he was pleased by Trump's promise to pursue a \$1 trillion infrastructure program, adding, "I'll strive to make sure California gets 12 percent" referring to the state's share of the US population. Residents were stunned by the ferocity of the waters. Alfred Ybarra had gone down to the Feather River with his children on Sunday to take photographs, and they quickly found themselves in trouble.

"Within minutes the water was up to the tires on my car," Ybarra said. "I told my kids, 'You have to pray. It's the only thing that you can do.'" Asked

whether he thought officials had overreacted, Ybarra responded, "Absolutely not." The main spillway, a separate channel, is also damaged because part of its concrete lining fell apart last week. Both spillways are to the side of the dam itself, which has not been compromised, engineers said. The situation grew less dire later on Sunday as water levels dropped, leaving the weakened unpaved emergency spillway largely intact. By Monday, the level of the lake fell enough so that water was no longer pouring over the hill.

Repairs and drainage

Erosion caused by the hole in the side of the main spillway appeared to have abated by Monday, and it was back to more or less normal operations, officials said. The aim is to lower the reservoir's overall water level by 50 feet - and prevent further spillover down the emergency hillside channel - before more rain arrives in the coming days and snow-melt runoff begins in the spring, acting state water resources director Bill Croyle

told reporters. He said he hoped to achieve that goal within two weeks. Another storm was forecast to arrive as early as today or tomorrow, though officials said they expected much of that precipitation to fall as snow rather than rain.

On Monday afternoon, crews began dropping large bags filled with rocks into a gap at the top of the emergency spillway in a bid to rebuild the eroded hillside. Meanwhile, water could be seen gushing from the main concrete spillway as dam operators for the California Department of Water Resources continued controlled releases through the paved chute into channels that route the water away from populated areas. The dam's hydropower release valves also have been shut down to prevent damage from sediment and debris carried by heavy rain. The earth-filled dam is just upstream and east of Oroville, a town of about 16,000 people. At 770 feet high, the structure, built between 1962 and 1968, is the tallest US dam, exceeding the Hoover Dam by more than 40 feet. —Reuters



CALIFORNIA: A home is seen marooned as the surrounding property is submerged in flood water in Oroville, California. Almost 200,000 people were under evacuation orders in northern California after a threat of catastrophic failure at the United States' tallest dam. —AFP