

International

Iran attacks leave Trump, aides divided, with no clear strategy

Trump fears plunging US into another 'endless' war

WASHINGTON: To retaliate or show restraint? Tougher sanctions or negotiate? The US administration, divided between hard-line hawks and a Donald Trump who fears plunging the country into another "endless" war, is struggling to define its strategy against Iran - as demonstrated by its uncertain response to recent developments in the Gulf of Oman. Here is what we know about the US response and administration thinking.

How has US reacted to attacks?

It took only hours for Washington to directly accuse Tehran of being "responsible" for the attacks Thursday against two oil tankers. The incident had Iran "written all over it," Trump said Friday, rejecting Tehran's denial of any such role. The president pointed to a video that purports to show a patrol boat of Iran's Revolutionary Guards pulling alongside one of the tankers to remove an unexploded limpet mine from the ship's hull.

But the US condemnations were not followed by threats of any immediate retaliation. That represented a degree of restraint by an administration that has been steadily tightening economic and diplomatic sanctions against Iran, and which last month stepped up its "maximum pressure" campaign with new deployments of ships, bombers and troops to the region.

War of words, or just plain war?

"The situation between the US and Iran is becoming increasingly dangerous," tweeted Colin Kahl, a former Obama administration national security advisor now at Stanford University in California. Both sides could "easily... slide into a war they claim they want to avoid," he said. Between the continuing war of words and the recent escalation, numerous observers and US allies fear an incident could degenerate into open conflict.

But Aaron David Miller, a former negotiator in both Democratic and Republican administrations, does not see the recent attacks as "sufficient for a casus belli." "If, in the wake of this incident, the Trump administration chose to

strike Iranian vessels directly, or the Iranian mainland, or Iranian forces in Iraq and Syria, or in Yemen, you have zero support," said Miller, now a Middle East expert at the Wilson Center think tank.

A 'focus on diplomacy'

Trump, for his part, has made it abundantly clear: He does not want to embroil the country's military in another costly and "endless" war like those in Afghanistan and Iraq. If acting US defense secretary Patrick Shanahan has expressed a determination to "defend our forces and our interests around the world," he has also reiterated that Washington "does not seek conflict." Pentagon spokesmen have stressed that neither American interests nor personnel have yet been attacked - making it an issue affecting global maritime traffic that should be settled at the international level.

"We have an international situation there in the Middle East, it's not a US situation," Shanahan told reporters on Friday, saying the administration was united in seeking an "international consensus to this international problem." But it is no secret that the president's national security advisor, John Bolton, has taken far more aggressive positions. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo is also considered a hawk on Iran, even if he has attempted to hew to Trump's more restrained line.

What does Trump want?

Beyond the question of how to respond to the recent attacks, a much larger question remains: What exactly is the concrete objective of the American pressure strategy against Iran? Last year Trump pulled the US out of the multinational 2015 accord that was designed to prevent Tehran from producing nuclear weapons.

He was harshly critical of the pact, negotiated during the Obama presidency, and said he wanted to compel the Islamic Republic to accept much more stringent restrictions on its nuclear program and to cease any "destabilizing" behavior in the Middle East. In recent weeks, even as



BANDAR ABBAS: In this file photo, Iranian soldiers take part in the 'National Persian Gulf day' in the Strait of Hormuz. Iran has dismissed as 'baseless' US accusations that it carried out twin attacks that left two tankers ablaze in the Gulf of Oman, escalating tensions across the region and sending world oil prices soaring. — AFP

his teams were cranking up the economic, diplomatic and military pressure on Iran, the president has issued repeated calls for direct dialogue with Iranian leaders. But with supreme Iranian leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei flatly refusing to talk, Trump seems uncertain how to proceed.

"I personally feel that it is too soon to even think about making a deal," the president said Thursday on Twitter, before again on Friday repeating his invitation: "We want to get them back to the table if they want to go back," he said on the "Fox & Friends" program. "I'm ready when they are. Whenever they're ready, I'm OK." "The real problem

is that there is no endgame in the administration's strategy," said Miller. "Regime collapse or change is fantastical right now."

Miller sees a disturbing lack of clarity in the administration's approach. "What's the purpose of the sanctions?" the former diplomat asked. "Is it to destroy the Iranian economy? Or is it a serious effort to drag the Iranians into the negotiations and produce a better outcome than what Obama got?" "I don't believe that this administration is prepared to (make) the kind of concessions that the Iranians would demand in a serious negotiation." — AFP

'Khan's Londonistan': Trump in new Twitter attack on UK's mayor

WASHINGTON: US President Donald Trump launched a fresh attack on London Mayor Sadiq Khan, backing a right-wing British columnist who has been widely accused of Islamophobia and once called migrants "cockroaches." Trump attacked his latest denunciation of the mayor to a retweet by Katie Hopkins about crime in "Khan's Londonistan" - using a term widely perceived as a pejorative reference to the British capital's Muslim population and Khan's Pakistan ancestry. "LONDON needs a new mayor ASAP. Khan is a disaster - will only get worse!" Trump wrote in response to Hopkins' tweet, later adding the mayor was "a national disgrace who is destroying" the city.

Earlier this month the president's plane had not even touched down in London for the start of a state visit when he tweeted that Khan was a "stone cold loser." Khan had criticized the red carpet treatment being given Trump for the visit. Trump said the mayor should "focus on crime in London, not me," and made a derisive reference to Khan's height. Khan, London's first Muslim mayor, had led opposition to Trump's visit, writing a newspaper article in which



US President Donald Trump

he compared the US leader to European dictators from the 1930s and 1940s.

At that time, the mayor's spokesman called Trump's tweets "childish" and "beneath the president of the United States." On a trip to London in July last year, Trump accused Khan of doing "a very bad job on terrorism," linking immigration to a deadly wave of crime in London. The feud began when Khan, the son of a bus driver who emigrated from Pakistan in the 1960s, criticized Trump's travel ban on people from certain Muslim countries.



In this file photo, Mayor of London Sadiq Khan arrives for a service of remembrance for the Grenfell tower fire at St Helen's church in west London. — AFP

Hopkins, who wrote in support of Trump's election campaign during her time at the Daily Mail, has been dogged by numerous allegations of Islamophobia and hate speech during her career as a columnist. Her description of migrants as "cockroaches" in 2015 prompted a rebuke by former UN High Commissioner for Refugees Zeid Ra'ad Al Husein, who said Hopkins had used language similar to that employed by some Rwandan media outlets in the run-up to the 1994 genocide, and by the Nazis in the 1930s. — AFP

Cubans feel the pinch as Trump cruise ban bites

HAVANA: The waxy sheen on his splendid 1934 Ford glimmers in the Caribbean sun, but nobody is hiring Estaban Estrada's red and white convertible these days - the dollars have dried up now that US cruise liners are no longer calling at Havana. Estrada's pride and joy is one of a line of classic American automobiles lined up outside Havana's baroque-style Cathedral, mostly idle since the Trump administration re-imposed travel restrictions this month.

"We are all stopped when normally we would all be working," says Estrada, as dozens of his colleagues shoot the breeze on nearby benches. "And this has been going on now for several days." He calls out to two passing women: "Taxi, princesses?" Business had been good. In 2014, then-president Barack Obama broke new diplomatic ground with the communist-run island and its leader Raul Castro.

US cruise liners began calling at Havana as decades of Cold War chill thawed. Estrada began taking American tourists around Havana's must-sees: the Malecon, Revolution Square and the Capitol. The San Cristobal restaurant on San Rafael street became a landmark on the tourist trail after Obama dined there during his breakthrough trip in 2016. Owner Carlos Cristobal Marques has seen a sharp downturn in business in recent weeks. "Today we are 20 percent full, yesterday we served only six tables all day."

'No plan B'

Nearly 900,000 tourists visited the island on cruise ships last year, according to official figures. Almost 40 percent were American tourists bringing much-needed dollars after nearly six decades of US embargo. Cuba seemed set to welcome record numbers of US cruise ship tourists this year, with 250,000 arriving in the first four months of 2019

alone, double the rate of the previous year. Then, on June 4, President Donald Trump made good on his threat to tighten the economic squeeze on Cuba, angered over Havana's support for Venezuela's socialist regime.

On June 5, the old American cars lined up on Havana's dockside as the last American ship sailed out, their drivers waving, bidding farewell to a regular source of dollars after Trump targeted the most common way US tourists visit the island. "European tourists usually come in the winter, so the ones that allowed us to keep working were American tourists from the cruise ships," Estrada says.

Their departure means the Cuban state is also denied revenue from docking fees and taxes paid by the cruise companies. "Yesterday, I did not work for the day," says Hector, who drives an old Chevrolet. "I'm giving myself a month, six weeks tops, and if it goes on like this, I'm turning in my licence." Costs must be paid regardless of business, he says - licence, parking, gas and insurance cost up to \$30 a day. Like his colleagues, he says the Cuban authorities, taken off guard by Trump's cruise ship ban, "have no Plan B".

Generous Americans

Instead, Trump's policies have driven Cuba "backwards". Yoel Montano, 44, had bet heavily on the surge of American tourists. A farmer, he left his tobacco fields to ply Havana's tourist trade with a horse and carriage. Now his mare "Mulata" stands idle in the shade of a tree in the old town. "When the cruise ships came, the whole country was alive, there were a lot of tourists. Today, the places are empty. It's too sad."

Trump "wants to finish us. He's crazy!" The US president had deprived him of "the best tourists, Americans. They are kind." At the "Al Pirata" restaurant in the cobbled streets of the tourist quarter, proprietor Eddy Basulto bemoans the departure of the Americans, who he says were "big tippers." "Our business is down 60 percent," says Basulto. "This morning, I only sold two breakfasts. But whenever the cruise ship arrived, I had three sittings in a row." — AFP



HAVANA: A private taxi driver in an old American car (center) takes tourists through the streets of Havana as others wait for customers. — AFP

Gunmen on motorcycles kill 34 in Nigeria's north

KANO: Gunmen have killed 34 people in Nigeria's northern Zamfara state where criminal gangs have been terrorizing remote villages, police said yesterday. Armed bandits on motorcycles stormed into neighboring Tugar Kafau and Gidan Wawa villages in Shinkafi district late Friday and shot dead 34 people, state police spokesman Mohammed Shehu said in a statement. "Normally has been restored in Tugar Kafau and Gidan Wawa... following attack by armed bandits... where 34 people were killed,"

Shehu said. He said the victims of the attacks were buried on Saturday, adding police were on the trail of the killers. Local residents put the death toll higher, at 35. The bandits were said to have opened fire on farmers on their fields outside the villages and also pursued those who fled. "The bandits killed 35 people in the attacks," said Lawwali Madattai, a resident.

Rural communities in Zamfara state have for years been terrorized by criminal gangs who raid villages, stealing cattle, kidnapping for ransom and burning homes after looting food supplies. The bandits are known to hide in camps in Rugu forest which straddles Zamfara, Katsina, Kaduna and Niger states from where they launch attacks on communities in the area. Last week, at least 40 people were killed and dozens injured in raids in eight remote villages in Niger state. — AFP

The 'richest black nation': PNG sets audacious goal

PORT MORESBY: Papua New Guinea's new prime minister has an ambitious - cynics would say far-fetched - objective of turning one of the world's poorest countries into the "richest black nation" on earth in just a decade. If national economies were like football teams, then Papua New Guinea would be near the bottom of the table struggling to avoid a relegation dogfight.

Violent crime and corruption are endemic, reliable electricity is rare, and population centers sit like isolated city-states, surrounded by trackless jungle and mountain ridges that soar into the equatorial sky. As rich as Papua New Guinea (PNG) is in culture, language and beauty, it is the 153rd most developed country in the world out of 189, according to the United Nations - doing slightly better than Syria, marginally worse than Myanmar.

New Prime Minister James Marape wants to change that. He has promised that within ten years his compatriots will live in "the richest black Christian nation" in the world. That is not going to be easy. The current titleholder is the highly industrialized economy of Trinidad and Tobago, where the average resident earns around 833% more than Papua New Guinea.

If the British territory of Bermuda were also included in the rankings, the task would be even more daunting. Papua New Guinea's economy would have to grow at a world-beating rate of around 30 percent per year, every year for the next ten years just to catch up. "PNG has never experienced 30 per cent growth in the past; nor has any other country for that matter, at least not for any sustained period of time," said Maholopa Laveil, a lecturer in economics at the University of Papua New Guinea.

To reach his lofty goal, Marape appears to be betting on a surge in gas revenues and more of that cash staying in the country. He has hinted that he may look to renegotiate a massive liquefied natural gas (LNG) contract with Total and ExxonMobil that would double national production to better benefit the local economy. He has also promised to stop the export of unprocessed hardwoods and tackle corruption. But the strategy comes with risks.

The World Bank has warned that even before a second LNG project comes online, the economy has "become increasingly concentrated in petroleum and gas-related activities". That, the bank warned, raises Papua New Guinea's vulnerability to the vagaries of international energy markets and natural disasters - like the 7.5 magnitude quake that froze production and stalled the economy in 2018. — AFP

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