



المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

ASSESSMENT REPORT

The First Month of the Trump White House: a Foreign Policy Disaster

Policy Analysis Unit - ACRPS | Feb 2017

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Series: Assessment Report

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Introduction

Donald Trump's first month in the White House has been marked by incompetence, confusion and an unprecedented level of leaks from government agencies. This present predicament is further exacerbated by the sense of paralysis created by the fact that hundreds of important positions within the State Department and the Energy Department, as well as others, remain vacant. With its unwillingness to cooperate with experienced, senior civil servants in government departments, the Trump administration has become overly reliant on a small number of close confidants, resulting in the hasty issuing of ill-advised executive orders, wreaking havoc on the United States' ability to conduct business, not to mention its image across the globe.

A Chaotic Foreign Policy

Trump's ambiguous foreign policy objectives have left observers confused about a number of policy issues of major concern to the US, including the relationship with NATO. America's allies are unsure if the sentiment in Washington is best expressed by the sitting president, who is on record as saying that the former bulwark against the Soviet Union was "obsolete" while on the campaign trail, or his Vice President Mike Pence, who reassured America's long-standing allies across the Atlantic of Washington's unwavering support for NATO, while also demanding greater financial contributions from the other members of the Alliance¹. The new administration's attitude towards rival and rising global powers in Beijing and Moscow is no less confusing. While Trump has embraced closer ties with Russia, others within his cabinet have only served to intensify conflict with Moscow, with the US Ambassador to the UN, Nikki Haley, blaming Russia for new fighting in Ukraine². Similarly, Trump's controversial phone call with the Taiwanese president was seen by many as a provocation against China and in defiance of its "One China Policy", only for the President to backtrack shortly after and agreeing

¹ Aline Barros, "VP Pence Reassures Europe US Remains Staunch Ally", VOA News, February 20, 2017, <http://www.voanews.com/a/vice-president-pence-reassures-europe/3731032.html>

² Tracy Wilkinson, "U.N. Ambassador Nikki Haley blames Russia for new fighting in Ukraine", *Los Angeles Times*, 2 February, 2017, <http://www.latimes.com/politics/washington/la-na-essential-washington-updates-u-n-ambassador-nikki-haley-blames-1486078737-htmlstory.html>

to honor the policy in a phone call with the Chinese leader³. Trump's unorthodox approach to the presidency culminated during a summit with the Japanese Prime Minister held at the President's Mar a Lago country club in Florida.

The news that North Korea had test launched a ballistic missile capable of delivering a nuclear warhead came as Trump and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe were dining at the luxury country club. The table on which the two world leaders were having dinner was allegedly converted into a makeshift operations center, right in front of the eyes of paying club members. In a complete break with established protocols, assistants used the flashlights in their mobile phones to help Abe and Trump read the fine print on classified documents. Given that Trump's campaign for the White House derived a lot of momentum from Hilary Clinton's supposed impropriety for the use of a private email server to conduct state business, this was particularly ironic—as is the president's continued use of a regular smart phone, which some security experts continue to insist might prove a security threat.

By the fourth week of the Trump presidency, the infractions of the Trump White House turned from the semi-farcical to the menacing. The new president's National Security Adviser, General Michael Flynn, resigned from his position due to allegations that he had misled Vice President Michael Pence on the nature of his dealings with Russia's US Ambassador during the 2016 election campaign⁴. This came in the wake of sanctions placed on Moscow by the outgoing Obama Administration, due to allegations that the Kremlin interfered with the outcome of the US presidential election.

Disarray in the National Security Council

The short tenure of Michael Flynn was by no means the first sign of chaos looming over Trump's National Security team. Shortly after his inauguration, Trump was quick to remove a number of technocrats from the National Security Council (NSC) – including the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the chief of the National Security Agency (NSA), an intelligence body, as well as a number of others from the board of the NSC –

³ Ben Blanchard and Steve Holland, "Trump changes tack, backs 'one China' policy in call with Xi", *Reuters*, February 10, 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-china-idUSKBN15P0ED>

⁴ Since that time, Trump has nominated H.R. McMaster, a Lt.-General in the US Army, to the post recently vacated by Flynn.

to make way instead for chief strategist Steve Bannon⁵. Trump was forced to rescind on that order and reinstitute the membership of the Director of the CIA, but only after a flurry of criticism⁶. Today, the Council is facing an exodus of its civil servants who did not want to work under Flynn, trying instead to return to their previous positions from which they had been seconded, leaving behind important vacancies in the body. Those who remain are bulking under the partisanship brought in by the White House, and some have taken to purging their social media accounts out of fear of being caught out criticizing the new Commander-in-Chief⁷.

Taking matters to farcical heights, reports in the media have indicated that many experts in the national intelligence community, including both the CIA and the NSA, are working to shield the president from a number of the most sensitive classified reports—out of fears that he may leak their contents or otherwise profit unduly from them⁸. Staff within the National Security establishment have complained that they are being asked to condense their reports, and to replace words with diagrams and maps where possible, as the new president, apparently, is not a big reader. Other mandarins within Washington are now considering engaging with the president directly on Twitter on matters of national policy, given Trump's fondness for the medium as a platform to share his views⁹.

⁵ Merrit Kennedy, "With National Security Council Shakeup, Steve Bannon Gets a Seat at the Table", National Public Radio, January 27, 2017, <http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/01/29/512295108/with-national-security-council-shakeup-steve-bannon-gets-a-seat-at-the-table>

⁶ David E. Sanger and Mark Landler, "What Trump's Changes Mean for the National Security Council", *The New York Times*, January 30, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/30/us/politics/national-security-council-stephen-bannon.html>

⁷ Pamela Brown and Ariane de Vogue, "White House examining several new travel ban plans", CNN, February 13, 2017, <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/02/13/politics/new-travel-ban-executive-order/>

⁸ Shane Harris and Carol E. Lee, "Spies Keep Trump in Dark on Intelligence in Sign of Mistrust", *The Wall Street Journal*, February 16, 2017, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/spies-keep-intelligence-from-donald-trump-1487209351>

⁹ David E. Sanger, Eric Schmitt and Peter Baker, "Turmoil at the National Security Council, from the Top Down", *The New York Times*, February 12, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/12/us/politics/national-security-council-turmoil.html>

Mayhem in an Empty White House

Weeks into the Trump presidency, office space in the vast West Wing remains largely empty, as does the nearby Eisenhower Executive Office Building. At the time of writing, the White House lacks a Director of Communications, leaving Spokesman Sean Spicer to fill in, alongside his role as White House press spokesman. Also vacant are US ambassadorships and a number of other important posts in the State Department, including undersecretaries of state and others, following the departure of large numbers of diplomats who refused to work under Trump.

For Republican legislators, the failure of the Trump administration to make the appropriate nominations—which in many cases Congress would have to ratify anyway—is making their lives even more difficult. This impairs the ability of (a now Republican-dominated) Congress to oversee the actions of the Executive branch. Moreover, the lack of skilled civil servants will also delay the drafting of new legislation, compromising promises which Republican candidates for election made to voters. A shortage of the skilled staff necessary is making itself felt in very clear ways. Not only do the executive orders signed by Trump reflect serious flaws in planning—such as the one banning travel to the US from seven Muslim-majority countries—but they also reveal embarrassing failings in terms of spelling and grammar¹⁰.

The latest developments in Trump's first month of presidency have produced a climate of fear and trepidation among staff members at the White House and the Executive Office. Career officials have watched as the hierarchies within the new Trump White House have been turned on their head: authority is no longer passed on according to merit or career progression, but rather personal proximity to the new president. Many seasoned government officials serving in the executive arm of government are also watching as their job security is challenged out in the open, with numerous Trump confidantes publicly proclaiming that government officials can be asked to leave at a moment's notice. The result has been that professionals with access to classified

¹⁰ Scott Wong, "GOP Congress unnerved by Trump bumps", *The Hill*, February 18, 2017, <http://thehill.com/homenews/house/320088-gop-congress-unnerved-by-trump-bumps>

intelligence reports are now worried about their futures—seemingly fueling the latest deluge of intelligence leaks from the White House¹¹.

The Republicans' Dilemma

The present state of upheaval ripping through the Trump White House is worrying the Republican Party. Despite now having total control of both of the elected arms of government—the Congress and the Executive—not only on the federal level but across most of the states, in addition to the President's apparent ability to shift the Supreme Court in his favor, lawmakers within the Grand Old Party (GOP) are aghast at the incompetence shown by Trump and his team. Many Republicans in Congress now worry that the Trump circus of a White House will hinder rather than help their busy legislative agenda during the first 100 days in power. Ultimately, the liability of a Trump White House could become a liability which undoes Republican supremacy across both Houses of Congress in the mid-term elections, due in 2018.

Republicans today have the thankless task of defending Trump in the face of serial scandals, either by the president or one of his close advisers. They are now – in vain – trying to persuade the new president to stick to the script of a conservative agenda to dismantle the Affordable Care Act introduced by Obama and to introduce tax reforms. Yet Trump's insecurities surrounding his own electoral legitimacy appear to have consumed the president, preventing him from moving forward on the Republicans' hardcore agenda. Embittered by the Trump administration's refusal to communicate with them or to coordinate properly with the relevant government departments, congressional Republicans have been forced into a neutral stance in the divisions which pit the Executive against America's Judiciary. Similarly, there are doubts about how far the influence of Trump's Vice President and informal congressional liaison, former Governor Mike Pence, run within the new White House.

Another factor serving to heighten doubts about the competence and effectiveness of Trump's leadership are emerging rumors about the possible forced resignation of Chief-of-Staff Reince Priebus, seen by many as an effective lever of pressure available to the

¹¹ Ashley Parker and Philip Rucker, "Upheaval is now standard operating procedure inside the White House", *The Washington Post*, February 13, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/upheaval-is-now-standard-operating-procedure-inside-the-white-house/2017/02/13/d65dee58-f213-11e6-a9b0-ecee7ce475fc_story.html

Republican Party. His resignation would lead to the further ideological polarization of the Trump White House, sharpening the divide with more moderate figures within the Republican Party.

Conclusion

A truly unconventional presidency has emerged out of Trump's unconventional candidacy and colorful campaign. His penchant for dramatic oversimplification (to the point of 140-character tweets) notwithstanding, Trump's presidency simply cannot be measured according to any standard criteria. Colliding head-on with the main branches of government—including the Executive, of which he is ostensibly the head—the new president often resorts to his electoral base, which he can always rely on in his battle against Washington's "swamp". This conflict between a populist, provocateur president and the erstwhile stable institutions of the country he is meant to lead is likely to continue, leading many to wonder how America will fare in the end. Either the populist rabble-rouser with his disruptive politics will prevail, or the institutions will eventually triumph: ultimately, the true frailty of the democratic institutions which have heretofore governed and defined America.