News



Peace demonstrators are seen at a peace rally in Chief Quipuha Park on the island of Guam Aug. 14. (CNS/Reuters/Erik De Castro)



by James Dearie

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November 4, 2017

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After a presidential election campaign promising sweeping changes in foreign policy, little has changed in the substantive policy of the United States when it comes to matters of war and peace, but a serious tonal and rhetorical shift has taken place, experts say.

A Nation Under Trump

As the anniversary of Donald Trump's election as president of the United States approached, the NCR staff wondered if the calls to action that persisted immediately following the election remained as urgent. We identified several policy issues to explore and asked NCR reporters to interview key players about what has transpired since Nov. 8, 2016. The entire series can be found here.

Perhaps the most prominent — and potentially dangerous — foreign policy issue to arise in the first year of President Donald Trump's term has been the escalation of North Korea's rhetoric, missile building and nuclear program. Kim Jong-Un, the young leader of the country, has overseen the launch of missiles near the American territory Guam and over American ally Japan.

Trump has responded with a slew of insults on Twitter and promised that more threats from North Korea will be met with "fire and fury like the world has never seen." In a September speech to the United Nations, Trump raised the possibility that the U.S. and its allies may in the near future "have no choice but to totally destroy North Korea."

Charles Kupchan, senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations and special assistant to the president and senior director for European Affairs on the staff of the National Security Council during the Obama administration, called the verbal confrontation between the president and Kim's regime a "rhetorical duel between two leaders that exhibit an immaturity when it comes to diplomacy" in an interview with NCR.

Andrew Bacevich, professor emeritus of international relations and history at Boston University and retired army colonel, concurs. "If Hillary Clinton had been elected president, she, too, would have reacted strongly to the provocations of North Korea … but [Trump's] ill-tempered language makes things worse," he told NCR.

Others disagree. While the back and forth between Trump and the North Korean regime "looks unseemly, and [is] not helpful, I don't think it's making things far worse," Michael Desch, director of the Notre Dame International Security Center, told NCR. "I think we can live with a nuclear North Korea."

Despite the rhetoric on both sides, the "underlying policy is one in which there is continuity," Kupchan says. "American presidents have struggled to find a combination of economic pressure, military containment, and dialogue that could succeed in minimizing if not eliminating North Korea's nuclear program."

Kupchan says that whether the U.S. can tolerate a nuclear North Korea "is a devilishly difficult question," and sides with Bacevich in believing that the ongoing rhetorical duel between the two leaders makes it easy to imagine a "set of circumstances through which we slide toward some kind of military exchange that escalates. … [War] is by no means out of the question."

Trump has also ramped up the rhetoric about the Middle East.

He was harshly critical of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, a deal between the U.S. and some of its allies about Iran's nuclear program, and during the campaign, called it "a catastrophe," and "the worst deal ever."

According to the plan, Iran agreed to halt the expansion of its nuclear program in exchange for the other parties — China, France, Germany, the U.K. and the U.S., as well as the European Union — lifting sanctions that had long strangled the Iranian economy.

The deal is seen as necessary by many in the international community. The acquisition of nuclear weapons by Iran could provoke a nuclear arms race in the Middle East and give Iran, one of the world's leading state sponsors of terrorism, significant leverage in shaping the future of the region.



U.S. President Donald Trump arrives to speak about the Iran nuclear deal in the Diplomatic Room of the White House in Washington Oct. 13. He declared he would not certify Iran's compliance with the nuclear agreement, kicking a decision to reimpose sanctions back to Congress. (CNS/Reuters/Kevin Lamarque)

Under a law passed by Congress in the wake of the announcement of the deal, the president must certify that Iran is in compliance and that remaining in the deal is in America's best security interests. Trump announced on Oct. 13 that he would not recertify the deal.

Bacevich sees Trump's action as "posturing" that "basically offloads responsibility to the Congress," which now has to decide whether to reinstate sanctions on Iran.

It is unclear what impact those sanctions would have, considering that none of the other parties to the deal have expressed anything but support for remaining compliant.

"Trump seems to think that the United States, by itself, calls the shots," Bacevich says. "That simply is not the case."

According to the International Atomic Energy Agency, Iran has done nothing to violate the terms of the deal. Trump claims that Iran has committed "multiple violations of the agreement," but has not specified what those violations are. In October, both Defense Secretary James Mattis and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson voiced support for remaining in the deal.

Trump has also announced that he will send thousands more troops to Afghanistan, where he plans to focus on "killing terrorists" instead of "nation-building." The president says his administration will assess "conditions on the ground, not arbitrary timetables" to "guide our strategy from now on."

Kupchan is skeptical that much will change in the U.S. approach to Afghanistan. "It's hard to fight terrorism without nation-building," he said. "I think there is a lot of continuity struggling to maintain the necessary number of troops." As president, Barack Obama had set timetables for withdrawal, but frequently adjusted them as circumstances required.



Afghan officials inspect outside the German embassy after a May 31 bombing in Kabul. At least 90 people were killed and more than 400 others wounded in one of the worst extremist attacks since the drawdown of foreign forces from Afghanistan in 2014. (CNS/Reuters/Mohammad Ismail)

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"I don't think that anybody thinks the number of troops we're talking about sending over or possible changes in the rules of engagement are going to make a big difference," Desch adds. "This is more about doing something symbolically than it is about a radical shift in strategy."

Trump's administration has also claimed credit for the recent success the U.S. and its allies have had in the ongoing war with the ISIS. "Nearly 30 percent of all the territory that has been retaken from ISIS — about 20,000 square km — has actually happened in the last six months," Brett McGurk, Special Presidential Envoy to the

Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, told reporters in August.

"The truth of the matter is the campaign that is rolling back the Islamic State was initiated under President Obama," Bacevich said. "It was already making progress under President Obama." He added, however, that "Trump and his generals have increased the level of U.S. military efforts supporting that campaign, and in that sense, can reasonably claim some measure of the credit."



Iranian men shout anti-U.S. slogans after Friday prayers in Tehran, Iran, April 7, following U.S. missile strikes in Syria. (CNS/EPA/Abedin Taherkenareh)

Trump's success against ISIS has not been without cost. The official civilian death toll in Iraq and Syria rose dramatically during Trump's first few months in office as U.S. airstrikes increased. U.S. Central Command has officially acknowledged 484 civilian deaths as a result of anti-ISIS airstrikes since August 2014, with 285 coming between February and June. The true death toll of the airstrikes is probably close to 4,000 as of this summer, according to a June report by The Guardian.

While many of Trump's foreign policies may represent substantive continuity with his predecessors, there has been marked shift in the thinking behind it, which may have more dramatic results in the future. "I think Trump's U.N. speech was illuminating," Kupchan said.

In the speech, Trump declared to the United Nations General Assembly that national leaders "will always, and should always, put [their] countries first. … As long as I hold this office, I will defend America's interests above all else."

"He sees the world as populated by nation states, each of which is out for itself," Kupchan said. "If we can find areas where our interests coincide, then we will work together, and if not then … it's survival of the fittest."

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This story appears in the **A Nation Under Trump** feature series. View the full series
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A version of this story appeared in the **Nov 3-16, 2017** print issue under the headline: US foreign policy substantively the same.