



**INSTITUTE OF
STRATEGIC STUDIES**

web: www.issi.org.pk
phone: +92-920-4423, 24
fax: +92-920-4658

Issue Brief

Trump's Growing Aggressive Military Approach

Mahrukh Khan, Research Fellow, ISSI

April 21, 2017

President Trump recently promised an increase in defence spending, partly by cutting the spending on the US State Department, the Environmental Protection Agency and other non-



defence programs. The US currently spends \$600 billion on its defence¹ and the Trump administration plans to add another \$50 billion to it².

President Trump's military muscle approach has already risked US ties with Iran after Iran tested a ballistic missile. Trump Administration's former National Security Advisor Michael Flynn remarked that we (US) is officially putting Iran on notice for what he said was a 'provocation'.³ It marked a sudden change in not only tone, but also policy in Washington towards Iran, as compared to President Trump's predecessor Barrack Obama who was successful in negotiating a nuclear deal with Iran in 2015. Trump in his campaign frequently criticised the nuclear deal that the Obama administration agreed to with Iran, and referred to it as a weak and ineffective deal. The statement made by Michael Flynn made is obvious that Obama's less confrontational approach towards Iran is now off the table. The tough posturing by the Trump administration also foreshadows even harder economic and diplomatic sanctions and measure against Iran. One of the official at the White House stated that, "We are in the process of evaluating the strategic options and the framework for how we want to approach these issues."⁴

In a display of these evolving strategic options, on April 7, the Trump administration ordered a barrage of 59 Tomahawk missiles by its warships in the Mediterranean on a Syrian airbase that was home to

¹ Michael O'Hanlon, "U.S. Defense Strategy and the Defense Budget," Brookings Institute, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/OHanlon_FINAL.pdf

² Trump's first budget proposal will call for \$54 billion increase in defense spending, CNBC, February 27, 2017 <http://www.cnbc.com/2017/02/27/trumps-first-budget-proposal-will-call-for-54-billion-increase-in-defense-spending.html>

³ "Trump adopts aggressive posture toward Iran after missile launch," Reuters, February 2, 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-iran-idUSKBN15G5ED>,

⁴ "Trump adopts aggressive posture toward Iran after missile launch," Reuters, February 2, 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-iran-idUSKBN15G5ED>,

warplanes allegedly accused of carrying out a chemical attack earlier in the month. Again, on April 13, 2017, a US plane dropped GBU-43, the biggest non-nuclear bomb on suspected ISIS hideouts and tunnels in Nangahar province in eastern Afghanistan. President Trump has time and again assured the troops in Afghanistan that they have full support from the White House. The Massive Ordnance Air-blast Bomb (MOAB) also dubbed as the 'Mother of all Bombs' was tested by the US in 2003 but has never been used in combat before. The bomb is specifically designed to pulverize bunkers, and underground hideouts. The main purpose of the bomb is not to fragment or produce shrapnel, but to build a pressure blast for the sole purpose to collapse infrastructure whether under or above ground. The use of the bomb was undertaken by the special operation forces in Afghanistan, and partial purpose to use the bomb was to test it in the margins of the valley in Afghanistan, as the geography of the area will help to produce more pressure and cause rather excessive damage than it is built to do. The use of such ordinance will also give the US military a better understanding of the use of the bomb in any future strikes in different landscapes and environment. The use of MOAB seems to be an experimentation of the bomb that has never been used before. Secondly, it also shows off the power and might of the US military, and to what length it can go to in order to achieve its strategic, as well as national security interests against other opponents like North Korea or Iran.

The US growing aggressiveness as well as frustration towards Iran is further evident by the statement made by Trump's National Security Adviser, Michael Flynn, who accused Iran of attack against a Saudi naval vessel by Iran-allied Houthi militants off the coast of Yemen, which according to the US, underscored "Iran's destabilizing behaviour across the Middle East."⁵ Similarly, US' posture towards North Korea post their latest volley of missile test changed significantly. The White House said that US, South Korea, and Japan agree "to continue close bilateral and trilateral cooperation to demonstrate to North Korea that there are very dire consequences for its provocative and threatening actions."⁶

America's top military commanders too are implementing the vision articulated by Defence Secretary James Mattis: Decimate Islamic State's Middle East strongholds and ensure that the militants don't establish new beachheads in places such as Afghanistan.⁷ The Trump administration is creating more freedom for the military commanders in active battle area to take decisions on their own. As a result, a

⁵ "Trump adopts aggressive posture toward Iran after missile launch," Reuters, February 2, 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-iran-idUSKBN15G5ED>,

⁶ <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/nationworld/ct-north-korea-missile-tests-trump-20170306-story.html>

⁷ Trump gives generals more freedom to make decisions in ISIS fight, Fox News, April 15, 2017 <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2017/04/15/trump-gives-generals-more-freedom-to-make-decisions-in-isis-fight.html>

more muscular US military approach is expanding in Afghanistan under the Trump Administration. The decision by the Trump administration to use a more muscular approach seems to be a signal to other adversaries of the US that it will not shy away from using aggressive military options against its enemies if need be. President Trump has given the military commanders authorization to move and decide on targets according to their discretion. The new approach was on display this week in Afghanistan, where Gen. John Nicholson, head of the US-led coalition there, decided to use one of the military's biggest non-nuclear bombs.⁸

The use of the bomb also reflects a change in President Trump's priority areas, shifting from domestic issues to more strategic and global issues. He is interested now in not only putting more boots on the ground in Afghanistan, but also use other means to achieve its strategic goals. This also paves way for the US military to test and try new weapons and military technology in Afghanistan, and maybe in Syria later in time.

⁸ Trump gives generals more freedom to make decisions in ISIS fight, Fox News, April 15, 2017
<http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2017/04/15/trump-gives-generals-more-freedom-to-make-decisions-in-isis-fight.html>