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Applying ‘maximum pressure,’ Trump faces burgeoning crises overseas

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President Trump ran for office vowing to extricate the United States from entanglements abroad. But his administration now finds itself juggling three national security crises overseas — with Iran, Venezuela and North Korea — while confronting China over trade.

The situation is partly a function of uncontrollable events but also the result of Trump’s “go big or go home” approach to foreign affairs, which has led his administration to apply “maximum pressure” to multiple nations simultaneously, rather than prioritize one over the other or take incremental steps.

The maximalist tactics at times have raised the prospect of big breakthroughs, ones that Trump hopes to take to the campaign trail for his reelection, particularly when it comes to North Korea. At the same time, it has brought what former policymakers describe as a greater risk of crises and miscalculations, as well as possible distractions from the primary goal of the administration’s national security strategy: countering Russia and China.

“The president’s apparent tendency to brinkmanship brings with it a degree of danger — and it’s even more dangerous when it’s combined with a pattern of bluffing,” said James Dobbins, a former top diplomat who is now a senior fellow at the Rand Corp.

Whether Trump is willing to pursue military action, which he and his aides have referenced in public remarks, is a looming question. He has long been a vocal skeptic of American military force abroad and at times has expressed concern about the more hawkish impulses of his national security adviser, John Bolton. Strategy experts cite the risk of overextending U.S. rhetoric in conflicts with possible military outcomes if the president isn’t willing to back words with actions.

“It’s kind of like the not terribly capable bully, who likes pushing people around and teasing them, but when push comes to shove, is nervous to actually get into a bar fight,” said Mara Karlin, a former Pentagon strategist during the Obama administration and a professor at Johns Hopkins University.

Trump administration officials dispute that the president is engaging in any reckless brinkmanship. They point out that Trump and his top advisers primarily voice Washington's desire for peaceful resolutions to the confrontations with North Korea, Iran and Venezuela, and note that he has reinvigorated the diplomatic track with Pyongyang, brokering the suspension of menacing intercontinental ballistic missile tests. This past week, Trump extended an olive branch to Iran, saying "I'd like to see them call me," even as his top aides lambasted the country and the U.S. military said it would respond to any attack on American interests with unrelenting force.

"The administration continues to leverage diplomacy, pursue economic pressure, and enforce existing laws to deter malign actors seeking to threaten stability and security," a senior administration official said in a statement. "The United States, though, remains prepared to respond to any threats against America or our allies."

The official defended the efficacy and rationale of the administration's approach. "The United States is responding to legitimate threats against America and our allies and partners with highly effective maximum pressure campaigns," the official said.

The possibility that Trump's resolve could be tested has increased in recent days.

In Asia, progress in talks with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un showed signs of backsliding, as the United States seized a North Korean vessel allegedly used for evading sanctions and suspended efforts to recover remains of American military personnel killed during the Korean War. Pyongyang, for its part, carried out new short-range missile tests, raising the possibility of a return to intercontinental ballistic missile testing it suspended after talks with Trump.

In South America, top administration officials suggested the possibility of military action against Venezuela after a failed insurrection by the U.S.-backed opposition took officials in Washington off guard. The U.S. military sent a hospital ship to the nation's coast in between preparing for contingencies should Nicolás Maduro's government fall.

Perhaps the most concerning developments arose out of the Middle East. A year after Trump pulled out of the Iranian nuclear accord, Tehran announced that it would stop complying with some elements of the agreement, promising to enrich uranium to a higher level than allowed under the treaty. The decision once again raised the threat of nuclear proliferation in one of the most unstable parts of the world.

Meanwhile, the Pentagon dispatched a carrier strike group, a bomber force and a Patriot missile battery to the Middle East after receiving intelligence suggesting that Iran could be preparing an attack against U.S. troops or interests in the region.

As the crises with North Korea, Venezuela and Iran unfold, one risk is that the Trump administration will lose focus on a national security strategy that calls for concentrating primarily on Russia and China.

In recent weeks, Trump's top national security officials, including Bolton and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, have spent most of their public messaging time talking about those three situations rather than about longer-term threats.

James Carafano, a scholar at the Heritage Foundation, said he didn't see the developments as a drift away from the strategy, but rather as inevitable confrontations, noting that the strategy shift was less about abandoning them and more about lessening focus on transnational terrorism.

"A big part of Venezuela is the U.S. showing the Russians and the Chinese it's going to maintain dominance in the Western Hemisphere," he said. "Iran is always part of the mix because it's the chief destabilizer in the Middle East. And North Korea directly threatened the United States."

A senior State Department official said dealing with these brewing crises hasn't taken away from the Trump administration's focus on Beijing and Moscow.

The United States has tried to curb the expansion of Chinese firms such as Huawei and China Mobile, albeit with mixed success. Washington has called out the alleged mistreatment of China's Muslim minority population and blocked certain Chinese investments.

The State Department official noted the wide array of sanctions against Russia for interfering in the 2016 election, poisoning a former Russian spy in Britain and intervening in Ukraine, though the punishments largely came at the urging of Congress. The official spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss administration strategy.

The Trump administration has worked relatively closely with allies on its approach to Venezuela, but it has broken with allies in Europe over Iran and at times has clashed with South Korea over how to handle talks with the Kim regime.

"The world is changing, and the United States' ability to manage things in the way it used to, believing we had the wisdom and the foresight and the resources to tackle all things simultaneously, and other countries were inclined to go along, that's definitely changed," said Chris Preble, vice president for foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute.

Against the backdrop of confrontations with North Korea, Venezuela and Iran, Trump has also been applying economic pressure to China, most recently hiking U.S. tariffs on \$200 billion in Chinese goods.

Apart from a high-profile strike on Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad's air force in 2017 over chemical weapons use, and the continuation of operations in Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq, Trump has largely been skeptical of taking new military actions. With China, however, he has demonstrated a comfort with employing blunt economic force.

"The one source of some comfort is that Trump does seem to be risk-averse when it comes to military action, and I'm sure the U.S. military are reinforcing him in that regard," Dobbins said. "The more dangerous of these situations in the short to medium term is probably the Chinese one, since that's an area where he has been less risk-averse."