

TRUMP VS CABINET PICKS

KEY CONTRADICTIONS IN FOREIGN POLICY

Toughness with Russia and China, support of the Iran nuclear deal, the quest for a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: Donald Trump's diplomacy and military picks have outlined the incoming administration's foreign policy in Senate confirmation hearings this week. And on many strategic issues Rex Tillerson chosen as secretary of state, and James Mattis, pick for defense secretary, have contradicted Trump in the hearings Wednesday and Thursday.

ON PUTIN AND RUSSIAN AGGRESSION

Taking a stance resolutely at odds with Trump, Tillerson and Mattis lobbed criticisms at Russian President Vladimir Putin. The retired US general was particularly harsh. He accused the Russian president of "trying to break the North Atlantic alliance." And Tillerson, the secretary of state nominee, said: "Our NATO allies are right to be alarmed at resurgent Russia."

CHINA AND SOUTH CHINA SEA ROW

Both nominees also took a stern line with China, the US rival in the Asia-Pacific, a region made a diplomatic and economic priority by the administration of Democratic President Barack Obama. The United States will send "a clear signal" to China that it must stop building islands in the South China Sea and Washington will block its access to those islands, Tillerson said.

IRAN AND NUCLEAR DEAL

The international agreement reached in July 2015 to control Iran's nuclear pro-



Iraqi Special Operations Forces (ISOF) run with their weapons during clashes with Islamic State militants in frontline near university of Mosul, Iraq, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Iraqi forces gain ground in Mosul

AFP, Mosul

Iraqi special forces stormed the Mosul University complex in the city's northeast yesterday and pushed forward to reach another bridge across the Tigris river, beating Islamic State further back, the military said.

The militants were fighting back at the university, which they seized when they took over the city in 2014. There were heavy clashes inside the campus, a Reuters reporter said.

Iraqi forces have recaptured most districts in eastern Mosul in nearly three months of a US-backed offensive.

A senior Iraqi counterterrorism service (CTS) officer said the university was the most important Islamic State base in the eastern half of the city.

Iraqi forces aim to take full control of the eastern bank of the Tigris river, which bisects Mosul from north to south, before they can launch attacks on the west, which Islamic State still fully holds.

Driving the ultra-hardline group out of its Mosul stronghold will probably spell the end for the Iraqi side of its self-styled caliphate that stretches across areas of Iraq and Syria.

Earlier in the day, bulldozers smashed through a wall surrounding the campus and dozens of CTS troops sprinted through carrying rocket-propelled grenade launchers, a Reuters reporter said.

An Iraqi officer said army units backed by air strikes had also taken control of Hadba district, north of the university, and would aid the assault on the complex.

In a separate advance further south in the city, other elite CTS units reached the 2nd Bridge, also called Freedom Bridge, one of five across the Tigris, the military statement reported by state TV said.

Iraqi forces have now reached Mosul's two southernmost bridges, having battled their way to the 4th Bridge several days ago.

Pak should 'expel' terror groups

Says US defence secy pick Mattis

PTI, Washington

In a tough message to Pakistan, James Mattis, Donald Trump's pick for US defence secretary, has said that if confirmed, he would tell Islamabad the need to "expel or neutralise" externally-focused militant groups operating with impunity within the country.

In his written submission to the Senate Armed Services Committee ahead of his confirmation hearing on Thursday, Mattis noted that "conditioning our security assistance" to Pakistan has a mixed history, "but I will review all option."

"If confirmed, I will work with the State Department and the Congress to incentivise Pakistan's co-operation on issues critical to our national interests and the region's security, with focus on Pakistan's need to expel or neutralize externally-focused militant groups that operate within its borders," said Mattis.

The 66-year-old Marine general, who retired in 2013 after serving as commander of US Central Command, was responding to a question if he supports conditioning US aid to Pakistan.

Nick-named as "Mad Dog" Mattis, the retired general told lawmakers that Pakistan has "learned some hard lessons" because of its dealings with the Afghan Taliban, as violence in that country reflects.

"I believe they should do more to collaborate with their neighbour. We should urge Pakistan to take further actions against the Taliban and the Haqqani network," Mattis said.

"Sanctuaries and freedom of movement for the Afghan Taliban and associated militant networks inside Pakistani territory is a key operational issue faced by the Afghan security forces," he said, responding to a query.

US's pick for top diplomat can talk his way into war

Warns Chinese state media over Tillerson's South China Sea comment

AFP, Beijing

Prospective US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson better watch his mouth, angry Chinese media said yesterday, warning Donald Trump's nominee that his threats to block China in the South China Sea are fighting words.

The comments came after the former ExxonMobil CEO told US senators that he would seek to deny Beijing access to the artificial islands they have been building in the South China Sea.

China's actions in the region are comparable to Russia's invasion of Crimea, he said, a comment that did not sit well with the nuclear-armed Asian giant.

If Tillerson acted on his threats, Chinese state-owned China Daily warned "it would set a course for devastating confrontation between China and the US."

Satellite photos show China has been hard at work building military facilities in the contested waters, which are also claimed by the Philippines and Vietnam, among others.

Under US President Barack Obama, Washington has claimed Beijing's activities in the region threaten freedom of naviga-

tion and overflight through the commercially and strategically vital waters.

But it has not taken a position on the ownership of the islets, reefs and shoals that sit in one of the world's hotspots.

Tillerson, however, explicitly said that the territories "are not rightfully China's."

"Unless Washington plans to wage a large scale war in the South China Sea, any other approaches to prevent Chinese access to the islands will be foolish," the nationalistic Global Times wrote in an editorial.

The paper, which is thought to have some insight into the thinking of more hawkish members of Chinese Communist Party, added that Tillerson better "bone up on nuclear power strategies if he wants to force a big nuclear power to withdraw from its own territories."

China's official reaction to the comments was muted, with foreign ministry spokesman Lu Kang politely urging Washington to mind its own business.

"The South China Sea situation has cooled down and we hope non-regional countries can respect the consensus that it is in the fundamental interest of the whole world," he said.



(From left, clockwise) Donald Trump, Rex Tillerson and James Mattis

gram in exchange for a lifting of sanctions is viewed as a major diplomatic success for Obama. His successor Trump has promised to "dismantle" the "disastrous" accord. General Mattis, who is known for his deep hostility toward Iran and called the agreement "imperfect," nevertheless said: "But when America gives her word, we have to live up to it and work with our allies."

ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CRISIS

Mattis also seemed to put space between himself and Trump, who has vowed to move the US embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem and considers the disputed Holy City the capital. "What's the capital of Israel?" asked a senator in the confirmation hearing. "The capital of Israel I go to, sir, is Tel Aviv," Mattis responded. He also voiced support for a two-state solution of the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. However, Tillerson criticised the UN Security Council resolution on December 23 that condemned Israeli settlement building in the Palestinian territories and demanded it stop.

NUCLEAR NONPROLIFERATION, CLIMATE CHANGE

Tillerson voiced other differences with his would-be boss Trump, saying he would ensure the United States continue to pursue nuclear nonproliferation -- "one of the vital roles" of the country -- and work to reduce the number of nuclear weapons on the planet. As for climate change, which Trump has suggested was a hoax, Tillerson told senators "the risk of climate change does exist, and the consequences could be serious enough that action should be taken."

SOURCE: AFP

Obama ends open door policy for Cuba migrants

Havana says move an important step; dissidents fume

AFP, Washington

US President Barack Obama on Thursday ended a decades-old policy that allowed Cuban migrants who arrived illegally on US soil to stay.

In one of his final acts before leaving the White House, he scrapped rules allowing those fleeing communist Cuba and reaching American territory a fast track to permanent resident status.

Obama said the move would "bring greater consistency to our immigration policy."

The Cuban government welcomed the decision, calling it "an important step forward in bilateral relations."

Preferential immigration treatment for Cuban immigrants enticed millions to flee the island, fueling economic stasis and a severe "brain drain."

Meanwhile in the United States, the growing Cuban-American population became a potent political, cultural and economic force. There are around 1.8 mil-

lion Cuban-Americans today, including two Republican 2016 presidential candidates, Marco Rubio and Ted Cruz.

Passed in 1966, the Cuban Adjustment Act has offered any citizen of Cuba admission and permanent residence in the United States after spending one year in the country, with no yearly quota on immigrants.

However, then-president Bill Clinton decided in 1995 that Cubans intercepted at sea would be sent home under the policy Obama scrapped, which became known as "wetfoot/dryfoot."

However, Rubio, a senator from Florida, called Obama's decision "absurd."

But many Cubans in Panama -- a waypoint on their arduous overland trek to the United States -- reacted with fury.

"Obama has screwed all Cubans," Yadiel Cruz, a 33-year-old in a Catholic shelter in Panama City, told AFP on learning the US president had suddenly made it tougher for migrants like him to get into America.



PHOTO: AFP, REUTERS

Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (4th R) is being greeted by neighbours of Philippines' President Rodrigo Duterte yesterday as he arrives for a visit at Duterte's house in Davao City in southern island of Mindanao. Inset, Abe try durian fruit. With a visit to Duterte's bedroom, having one of the world's rarest birds named in his honour and guided by a sockless host, Abe had a morning to remember.

FACE OF INDIA'S HOMESPUN COTTON INDUSTRY

Uproar as Modi replaces Gandhi

AGENCIES

It is Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi spinning the "charkha" - not Mahatma Gandhi - on the 2017 calendar and diaries published by the Khadi Village Industries Commission or KVIC, a first that has taken many employees of the government body by surprise.

The commission's calendars have always featured Mahatma Gandhi, who founded the Khadi movement in the 1920s, aiming to boycott foreign goods in a non-violent protest against the British.

According to sources, a section of employees and officials were taken back to see the cover photo showing PM Modi weaving Khadi on a large 'charkha' or spinning wheel, in the classic pose of Mahatma Gandhi.

Some workers on Thursday refused to accept the new stationery and held a silent protest in the KVIC headquarters in Mumbai.

"We are not against inclusion of

Modi's picture on the dairies and calendars, but are pained not to find Gandhi's picture," the PTI news agency quoted a worker as saying.

"We simply want to know why Gandhi has not been given the space here? Is Gandhi no more relevant for khadi industry?"



The government-run Khadi KVIC defended its decision to use a photo of Modi, sitting in an almost identical pose while spinning cotton, on the cover of its 2017 calendar and diary.

Opposition leaders were quick to ridicule the image, reports Reuters.

"Becoming Gandhi requires years of self-sacrifice," Arvind Kejriwal, the chief minister of Delhi and a political opponent of Modi, tweeted in Hindi.

"You cannot become Gandhi by acting as if you can spin the charkha



(spinning wheel) - this will only make you a laughing stock."

Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party said the row over the calendar had been overblown. His minister of micro, small and medium enterprises, Kalraj Mishra, said there was no question of Modi or anyone else replacing Gandhi.

Israeli missiles strike Syria airbase near capital

AFP, Damascus

The Syrian army said yesterday that Israeli missile strikes caused a series of explosions at an airbase outside Damascus before dawn.

"In a desperate attempt to support terrorist organisations, Israeli enemy aircraft launched missiles from the north of Lake Tiberias (the Sea of Galilee) at 00:25 am," a military source told the state SANA news agency.

"The Syrian armed forces warns the Israeli enemy of the repercussions of this blatant aggression, and insists on continuing the war on terrorism to eliminate it," the source added.

The Israeli army had no comment on the strikes. An AFP correspondent heard several explosions and saw a large fire inside the Mazzeh airbase on the western outskirts of Damascus.

around the base as missiles hit ammunition warehouses.

Since the Syrian civil war erupted in 2011, the government has accused Israel of carrying multiple strikes on its territory.

Several have targeted Lebanese militant group Hezbollah, an Israeli archfoe whose fighters have been supporting the Syrian army against rebels whom the government of President Bashar al-Assad regards as "terrorists."

Meanwhile, Russia and Turkey have signed an agreement spelling out mechanisms to "coordinate" their air forces in Syria when conducting strikes "on terrorist targets", the Russian defence ministry said.

Turkey's foreign minister yesterday said Washington will be invited to fresh Syria peace talks being organised by Moscow and Ankara this month, but Russia declined to confirm the invitation.

Russia, Turkey agree to 'coordinate' strikes in Syria
US will be invited to fresh peace talks: Ankara