

Inside Trump's Iran decision

Witnesses reveal how the US president, surrounded by hawks, took decision to call off strikes

CNN Online

The tension between President Donald Trump's bellicose rhetoric and his non-interventionist foreign policy instincts was on full display Thursday afternoon as he huddled in the Situation Room.

Lawmakers in the room watched as the weight of his duties as commander-in-chief bore down on him, lives hanging in the balance.

Trump did not tip his hand on which way he was leaning, focusing instead on "drilling down" on the differing perspectives and arguments leveled by the assembled lawmakers, Senate Foreign Relations Chairman James Risch said. But it was clear, the Idaho Republican said, that Trump is a president who "doesn't want to go to war."

"I really watched him agonize over this. It comes down to one man," Risch told a small group of reporters.

"The president was really wrestling with it," House Armed Services Chairman Adam Smith, a Democrat, said.

Trump's own dilemma was met by a near unanimous national security team who felt



"We have additional avenues of sanctions pressure to impose. We have got additional sanctions for sure," a senior administration official told a small group of reporters Friday. "I would not say that the president is thinking about military options. The primary thing we're thinking about is additional sanctions."

of withdrawing from the Iran nuclear deal -- former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, former Defense Secretary James Mattis and former national security adviser HR McMaster, among others -- the president found himself surrounded by a phalanx of Iran hawks.

Chief among them, the president's national security adviser John Bolton led the charge in recommending the President move forward with military strikes, an administration official said. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Vice President Mike Pence also supported moving forward with the strikes.

The recommendation to the president: strike three Iranian military targets -- a set of radars and missile batteries -- in a pre-dawn coordinated attack, according to a US official with direct knowledge of the operation.

A senior administration official said the President's entire team of top national security advisers believed military strikes were "appropriate response" to Iran's downing of a US drone.

"There was complete unanimity amongst the President's advisers and DOD leadership on an appropriate response to Iran's activities," the official said. "The president made the final decision."

Tellingly, the official noted that the unanimity on how to respond to Iran preceded the president's decision to call off the strikes.

Trump wasn't just hearing from his national security team as he mulled his options. He also spoke with outside advisers and friendly members of Congress who sought to remind him of his pledge to get the US out of endless wars in the Middle East and urged him to show restraint.

But as the president faced decision time, he was once again surrounded by those hand-picked advisers who have encouraged his hardline stance on Iran -- from pulling out of the nuclear deal to imposing a series of crippling sanctions against the Iranian regime -- and who were now pushing for the US to level serious consequences on Iran for downing a US drone, which the US contends was flying in international airspace.

In arguing for a military response, Bolton and other officials told the president that failing to punish the regime for the downing of the drone would be viewed as permission for Iran and other countries to continue behaving badly. In their discussions with Trump, the risk a strike might escalate tensions was raised -- but characterized as an unlikely outcome to a necessary step.

Trump agreed to move forward with the

strikes. But between 7 pm and 8 pm ET on Thursday, as US military personnel in the region made final preparations for the airstrikes, Trump met once more with his advisers and military officials as the minutes counted down to the time of impact. It was the president's last chance to object to the operation and call it off.

"They came in about a half hour before," Trump said of the military brass. "And they said, 'Sir, we're ready to go. We'd like a decision.' I said, 'I want to know something before you go. How many people will be killed, in this case, Iranians?'"

"They said -- came back, they said, 'Sir, approximately 150,'" Trump recalled in an interview with NBC's "Meet the Press." "And I thought about it for a second and I said, 'You know what? They shot down an unmanned drone, plane, whatever you want to call it. And here we are sitting with 150 dead people.'"

"I didn't like it. I didn't think -- I didn't think it was proportionate," Trump said.

The decision to call off the operation minutes before it was set to take place hit at the heart of Trump's concerns about escalating the conflict with Iran into war, one Trump might compare to the war in Iraq which he has frequently criticized.

Aides said Trump appeared wholly

Report says president's national security adviser John Bolton, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Vice President Mike Pence supported moving forward with the strikes

Senior military officials say the uncertainty and possibility of a wider war in the region played a part in Trump's decision

Instead of war, officials say, US now preparing for more sanction

comfortable with his decision on Friday, without much second guessing. Instead, he liked the impression that he's bucked the advice of his team, which he has previously criticized in private for appearing to march him toward war.

And while Trump seemed confident on Friday that he had made the right decision and was framing it appropriately -- tweeting out a play-by-play on Twitter before addressing it in the NBC interview -- Trump's explanation did not explain why he had only learned how many casualties would result from the strikes minutes before they were to take place.

Casualty estimates are typically provided by military officials when presenting options to the President, and a White House official said Trump was given an estimated death toll long before he asked military officials for the count with just a half-hour to spare before the strikes. It's not clear whether Trump did not hear, internalize or understand the death toll when it was first relayed to him earlier in the day.



US writer says Trump sexually assaulted her

An advice columnist for Elle fashion magazine said Friday that Donald Trump sexually assaulted her in the dressing room of a New York department store around 1995-96, an accusation swiftly denied by the US president. Carroll, 75, says she ran into Trump at a department store in Manhattan while they were both shopping. She says that in an initially friendly encounter, Trump asked her for advice on buying a piece of lingerie for an unnamed woman. Then jokingly, they each suggested that the other should try it on. "The moment the dressing-room door is closed, he lunges at me, pushes me against the wall, hitting my head quite badly, and puts his mouth against my lips," Carroll wrote. Pinning her against the wall, Carroll says, Trump proceeded to pull down her tights, unzip his pants and penetrate her -- all while himself fully dressed -- until she finally managed to push him out and run from the dressing room. The account, revealed in an excerpt of Carroll's latest book and published Friday by New York magazine, makes her at least the 16th woman to have accused Trump of sexual misconduct before he became president.

Air India to reroute flights away from Iranian airspace

Air India will reroute flights to avoid Iranian airspace, an official said yesterday, as tensions ratchet up following Tehran's downing of a US drone. A spokesman for the country's biggest state-run carrier said it was told to alter its flight paths by the Director General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) -- the aviation regulator. Yesterday's decision means Indian commercial and cargo flights towards middle-eastern and European countries, as well as the US, will have to take lengthy and costly detours. Major airlines around the world have already said they would suspend their flights over Iranian airspace.

Mark Esper nominated as US Secretary of Defense

Donald Trump has nominated Mark Esper to be the US Secretary of Defense, the White House said late Friday, as Washington navigates a spike in tensions with Iran. The nomination of Esper, who was this week elevated to acting Pentagon chief from his post as Army



Secretary, was announced hours after Trump revealed he had come close to authorizing a strike on Iran after it shot down an American drone. There hasn't been a full defense secretary since the resignation of James Mattis in December last year after splits in the administration over Trump's sudden decision to remove US troops from Syria. Esper, who must be confirmed by the Senate, is the third man to lead the Pentagon in six months. He replaces Patrick Shanahan. Unlike Shanahan, who had no military experience, 55-year-old Esper served in the 1991 Gulf War as part of the famous 101st Airborne Division of the US Army.



A photo of a RQ-4 Global Hawk unmanned surveillance and reconnaissance aircraft. Inset, Iran's Revolutionary Guards display alleged debris from a downed drone in Tehran. PHOTO: AFP

the US should retaliate for a downed drone by striking Iranian targets. For the president, though, the answer was far from obvious -- ultimately he pulled the plug on military strikes, minutes before the point of no return.

But a senior US official said throughout the process, Trump was very invested and very serious. He very much understood that the military could not predict for him what the Iranian response to a US strike might be and it remains a significant administration concern not to start a wider war.

Military officials are pleased Trump didn't order the strike because of this uncertainty. At the end of the day, many said they believe these Iranian attacks on tankers and the drone are basically a message that Iran wants to talk and they have been telling the President this.

On Friday, talk had turned to sanctions.

reporters in the Oval Office on Thursday.

"You'll find out," Trump warned, ominously, as reporters peppered Trump with questions in the Oval Office about how he planned to retaliate. "They made a very big mistake."

But pressed further, Trump explained that he didn't just view that "mistake" as a strategic miscalculation that Iran would dearly pay for, but perhaps instead as a mistake of a different variety: an inadvertent error.

"I find it hard to believe it was intentional," Trump said. "I think it could've been somebody that was loose and stupid."

That cautious mindset would hang over Trump's deliberations throughout the day as he huddled several times with his national security team, weighing a range of options for US retaliatory action. And after shedding those advisers who warned him of the consequences

STRAIT OF HORMUZ Key oil transit under pressure

AFP, Paris

The Strait of Hormuz, located in the area where Iran shot down a US military drone, is a strategically important waterway for the world's oil transits, which lies at the heart of regional tensions.

GATEWAY TO THE GULF: The Strait of Hormuz links the Gulf to the Gulf of Oman and is situated between Iran and Oman. It is vulnerable due to its narrowness -- some 50 kilometres (30 miles) -- and its depth of no more than 60 metres (200 feet).

OIL TRANSIT HOTSPOT: The strait is a vital corridor connecting the petroleum-rich states of the Middle East with markets in Asia, Europe, North America and elsewhere. According to the US Energy Information Administration (EIA), in 2018 nearly 21 million barrels of crude a day transited the strait. That represents around 21 percent of world oil consumption and one-third of total global seaborne oil transit. A quarter of global liquefied natural gas trade also transited Hormuz, the EIA said.



Around 76 percent of the crude transiting the strait was destined last year for Asia, mainly China, India, Japan and South Korea. While Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have established a network of pipelines that can use alternative routes, they only allow the export of limited amounts -- around three million barrels a day in 2018, with a total capacity of 6.8 million. These pipelines too are vulnerable, as shown by the attack on a Saudi pipeline in May by Yemeni rebels.

ZONE OF TENSION, CONFLICT: Iran's Revolutionary Guard, the ideological army of the Islamic republic, controls naval operations in the Gulf. Tehran repeatedly criticises the presence of foreign powers in the region, notably the US Fifth Fleet stationed in Bahrain, and it has regularly threatened to close the strait if it comes under attack. One of the major disruptions to oil transit came in 1984 during the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) when more than 500 vessels were destroyed or damaged in the so-called "Tanker War". In 1988, an Iran Air flight from Tehran to Dubai, via Bandar Abbas, was shot down by missiles fired from a US Navy cruiser patrolling the strait. All 290 people on board were killed. The crew of the USS Vincennes said they mistook the Airbus for an Iranian fighter.

Lanka extends emergency

AFP, Colombo

A state of emergency was extended by Sri Lanka's President yesterday, going back on pledges to relax the tough laws introduced after the Easter Sunday attacks that killed 258 people.

Maithripala Sirisena said in a decree he believed there was a "public emergency" in the country, and was invoking provisions of the public security act extending the state of emergency.

The tough laws, granting sweeping powers to police and security forces to arrest and detain suspects, were due to expire yesterday.

Just over 100 people, including 10 women, are in custody in connection with April's Easter Sunday suicide attacks against three churches and three luxury hotels in Colombo.



Members of Mexican National Guard detain Central American migrants trying to cross the Rio Bravo, in Ciudad Juarez, State of Chihuahua, on Friday. Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador suggested Friday he and US counterpart Donald Trump should hold their first meeting in September to review progress on the countries' recent migration deal.

Johnson domestic 'row' rocks UK leadership race

AFP, London

Britain's leadership contest was rocked yesterday by reports that police were called to a late-night "row" between frontrunner Boris Johnson and his partner, just hours before campaigning opens to win over grassroots Conservatives.

The Guardian said officers were alerted early on Friday after a neighbour said there had been a loud altercation involving screams, shouts and bangs at the south London property, shortly after Johnson had secured his place in the final run-off to become prime minister.

The paper said late Friday Johnson's partner Carrie Symonds could be heard telling the former London mayor to "get off me" and "get out of my flat".

London's Metropolitan Police said it responded to a call from a local resident but that "all occupants of the address... were all safe and well".

Johnson is the runaway favourite to beat Jeremy Hunt, but will face questions over the incident on Saturday when he and Hunt kick off a month-long nationwide tour to win over the grassroots Conservatives, who

have the final say. Whoever takes the Tory party leadership in the week beginning July 22 -- and therefore becomes prime minister -- will then face the looming Brexit deadline of October 31.

The battle is likely to feature pledges from both contenders to take Britain out of the European Union safely and in one piece, succeeding where outgoing Prime Minister Theresa May repeatedly failed.

But the race might ultimately turn into a popularity contest between Johnson -- pugnacious but affable with a tendency for gaffes -- and the more diplomatic, low-key Hunt.

"The row" was splashed across the front pages of most newspapers yesterday, and while bookmakers were still betting for Johnson, pundits warned the incident could harm his chances.

Asean countries vow to tackle ocean waste

AFP, Bangkok

With Southeast Asia awash in rubbish, from plastic-choked whales to trash-clogged canals, leaders are planning to push through a deal to fight maritime debris at a regional meeting this weekend.

Just five Asian countries -- China, Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam and Thailand -- dump more than half of the 8 million tonnes of plastic waste that end up in oceans every year, according to a 2017 Ocean Conservancy report.

The region has come under fire for not doing enough to tackle its mounting trash troubles, with single-use plastic and sub-par waste management adding to the problem.

Leaders at a weekend meeting of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) are expected to sign a "Bangkok Declaration" on fighting maritime waste -- a first of its kind -- which promises to "prevent and significantly reduce marine debris", according to a draft seen by AFP.

But activists are worried the agreement doesn't go far enough. "If we are not reducing single-use plastic at the production process, this 'Bangkok Declaration'... will not succeed," said Tara Buakamsri of Greenpeace in Thailand. The agreement also omits penalties for the worst offending companies or countries, and fails to specify measures to tackle the problem.

NEWSIN brief

Army deployed amid Honduras protests

AFP, Tegucigalpa

Troops patrolled the streets of the Honduran capital Friday after three people were killed in protests against President Juan Orlando Hernandez, authorities and relatives said Friday. The government deployed troops after thousands of Hondurans blocked streets across the Central American country demanding Hernandez's resignation amid tensions over strikes by police and truckers.

Regime strikes kill 4 civilians in Syria

AFP, Beirut

Syrian government air strikes on the rebel-held northwest Idlib region killed four civilians, two of them children, yesterday, a war monitor said, as a two-month flare-up showed no let-up. Since late April, more than 460 civilians have been killed in government or Russian bombardment, according to the Observatory. The violence has forced around 330,000 people to flee their homes and hit 23 health centres, says UN.

7 dead in Cambodia building collapse

AFP, Phnom Penh

At least seven people died yesterday when an under-construction seven-storey building owned by a Chinese company collapsed at a Cambodian beach resort, officials said, as rescuers scoured the giant rubble heap for survivors. The building went down before sunrise in the casino-resort town Sihanoukville in southwest Cambodia. At least 21 people were reported injured in the accident.