

'America First' Means Nuclear Superiority.

By [M. K. Bhadrakumar](#)

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The US president's annual State of the Union address traditionally focuses on domestic issues but it also throws some light on the foreign policy priorities. President Trump's speech on Tuesday adhered to the pattern and if anything, the portions on foreign policy received scant attention, restricted to his "agenda to protect America's National Security." Trump's re-election bid for a second term in 2020 provided the backdrop.

Trump boasted about the US' military build-up and flagged the mammoth budget allocation of \$716 billion to "fully rebuild" the US military. As part of it, he said, the US is "developing a state-of-the-art Missile Defence System." He saw no reason to be apologetic about "advancing America's interests" and cast his decision to withdraw the US from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty in that light.

Trump made a pro forma offer to consider negotiating a "different (INF) agreement, adding China and others (read India and Iran)" but himself sounded sceptical, and went on to assert that the US "will outspend and out-innovate all others by far" in an arms race. He all but sought the US' nuclear superiority.

Clearly, the global strategic balance is going to come under enormous stress in the period ahead. It is inconceivable that Russia will allow the global strategic balance to be shifted. In conventional forces, Russia is at a disadvantage vis-a-vis the West and that gives added impetus to maintain the overall strategic parity with the US.

Notably, [Russia test-fired an RS-24 Yars](#) intercontinental ballistic missile today following Trump's speech and within hours of an earlier similar American [test-firing of a Minuteman ICBM](#) in California. The RS-24 Yars is a vastly improved version of the famous SS-29 ICBM that the Soviet Union deployed. It is presently the mainstay of the ground-based component of Russian nuclear triad.

This thermonuclear intercontinental ballistic missile has a range of 12 000 km, which brings the entire territory of the United States within its reach. Yars is equipped with multiple independent re-entry vehicle (MIRV) and is designed to evade missile defense systems (which Trump boasted about.) It maneuvers during the flight and carries both active and passive decoys and has at least 60-65% chance to penetrate defenses.

Significantly, during Tuesday's address before the Congress, Trump made no references to arms control negotiations with Russia, leave alone to comment on the fate of the New START nuclear arms reduction agreement (2010), which is due to expire in 2021.

Indeed, the 'breaking news' in Trump's speech was the announcement of his second summit meeting with the North Korean leader Kim Jong-un on February 27-28 in Vietnam. Trump

sounded upbeat about his “bold new diplomacy” with North Korea and claimed credit (justifiably so) for avoiding a catastrophic war on the Korean Peninsula. He acknowledged that there is much unfinished business, but placed trust in his “relationship” with Kim.

The only other foreign-policy topics that Trump touched in the speech were the US’ standoff Venezuela, the Middle Eastern conflicts (Syria and Afghanistan) and of course Iran. While he was rhetorical about the “brutality” and the “socialist policies” of the Venezuelan government of President Nicolas Maduro, Trump steered clear of any threats to intervene in that country. Trump merely said that the US stands with the Venezuelan people “in their noble quest for freedom.” On the other hand, Trump gently moved away from Venezuela to attack the “new calls to adopt socialism” in the US too and stated his resolve that “America will never be a socialist country.”

As regards the Middle East, Trump said his approach is based on “principled realism”. He recalled that his approach has been consistent: “Great nations do not fight endless wars.” Trump said it is time the troops came home from Syria, having defeated the Islamic State.

Curiously, in comparison with Syria, Trump made a somewhat nuanced reference to the Afghan war. Without elaborating, Trump hinted that the Taliban is not the US’ sole interlocutor for holding negotiations to reach a political settlement in Afghanistan. But the surprising part was when he said,

“As we make progress in the negotiations, we will be able to reduce our troop presence and focus on counter-terrorism. We do not know whether we will achieve an agreement.”

The carefully-worded formulation steered clear of making a commitment of a total US withdrawal from Afghanistan. In fact, Trump pointedly spoke of a reduced troop presence in Afghanistan while also underscoring the need to continue with counter-terrorist operations.

From Trump’s remarks, it appears that the US has somewhat pulled back from the reported progress at the recent 6-day talks in Qatar with the Taliban representatives. Whether this ambivalence is due to pressure from the US military and the Ashraf Ghani government against a withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan or is merely a tactical posturing to pressure the Taliban to make concessions remains to be seen.

Ghani’s preferred strategy (which US military commanders also advocate) is to reconcile the Taliban on the terms in which he had earlier reconciled Gulbuddin Hekmatyar two years ago — which is to say, by offering the insurgents an opportunity to join his government. The Pentagon has been doggedly opposed also to giving up the American bases in Afghanistan, which it considers to be of vital importance for the US’ long term global strategies.

Ghani had telephoned the US Vice-President Mike Pence in the weekend before Trump’s speech on Tuesday. Yet, Trump plainly ignored the Ghani government.

Trump made harsh references to Iran as “sponsor of terror” and the government in Tehran as a “radical regime” and “corrupt dictatorship”, but, strangely, he stopped well short of adopting any confrontational overtone, leave alone threaten Iran. Trump merely said, “We will not avert our eyes from a regime that chants death to American and threatens genocide against the Jewish people.”

In overall terms, the impression will be that Trump projected a foreign-policy outlook where the US will eschew military interventions in foreign countries that are in the nature of protracted entanglements through the remaining period of his term in office and concentrate instead on his domestic agenda, which he intends to make the centre piece of his campaign for re-election. A mood of retrenchment is evident all through and left to himself, Trump would like to avoid foreign-policy entanglements that do not directly impact American interests or his own campaign to win a second term as president.

Having said that, make no mistake, fundamentally and in a longer term perspective, Trump is actually pitching for “America First”. He believes in a strong America, whose military superiority will be unchallenged and whose capacity to force its will on the world community is never in doubt. Implicit in the strategy is a resumption of the US’ elusive chase for nuclear superiority — through an extremely expensive arms race in which Trump thinks Russia lacks the financial resources to compete with the US and China can be overwhelmed in military technology.

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