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FRANCE - EUROPE	3
Marine Le Pen Sharpens Attack on Emmanuel Macron in French Debate	3
Fugitive Oussama Atar Spurs Worries Over New Brussels Terror Attack	3
Editorial : 's legitimate — and what's not — about Trump's criticisms of Germany	4
More than 6,000 migrants rescued in Mediterranean amid surge on dangerous sea route	4
After Dutch Election, Eurogroup Leader's Fate Looks in Doubt	5
EU, Japan Speed Up Trade Talks to Counter Threat of U.S. Protectionism	6
Turkey Halts Campaign in Germany to Court Voters	6
INTERNATIONAL	7
A Test for Tillerson, and for U.S. Strategy on ISIS	7
A rebel push on Damascus shows that Syria's war is far from over	7
Yazidis who suffered genocide are fleeing again, but this time not from the Islamic State (UNE)	8
U.S. Military Investigating Reports of Civilian Deaths in Syria Airstrike.....	9
Resurgent Syrian Rebels Surprise Damascus With New Assaults	10

Turkey's Frightening Trifecta: ISIS, Erdogan & U.S. Nukes	10
Warnings of a 'Powder Keg' in Libya as ISIS Regroups	12
Tillerson visit to Moscow appears to be a stand-in for a Trump-Putin meeting	12
Bershidsky : Belarus Is the Latest Thorn in Putin's Side	13
Sharma : Is Modi Too Powerful for His Own Good? ...	13
Editorial : Rex Tillerson Has Shown No Illusions About North Korea.....	14
Becoming Duterte: The Making of a Philippine Strongman (UNE)	14
Secretary of state, NATO look for alternative date for first meeting	16
Rex Tillerson, NATO Work to Reschedule Meeting....	17
Coincidence or Message? A Timeline of Provocative Acts by North Korea	18
Britain and U.S. ban most electronic devices in cabins on flights from several Muslim-majority countries (UNE).....	18
Devices Banned on Flights From 10 Countries Over ISIS Fears (UNE)	20
U.S., U.K. Cite Terror Threat in Laptop, Tablet Ban on Flights.....	20
Wilkinson : How We All Advance Trump's Border-Control Agenda	21

ETATS-UNIS	22
Editorial : Neil Gorsuch sticks to the script	22
Parker : President Trump's sanest decision.....	23
Supreme Court Nominee Neil Gorsuch Deflects Tough Questions From Democrats (UNE)	23
Gorsuch Says He'd Rule Against Trump if Law Required It (UNE).....	25
Supreme Court nominee Gorsuch stresses his independence from President Trump (UNE)	25
Psaki : Trump's credibility is shot	27
Editorial : A President's Credibility.....	27
Editorial : A Republican Health Care Bill in Search of a Problem	27
Galston : The GOP Is Out of Excuses on Health Care..	28
Trump Warns House GOP to Support Health-Care Bill or Risk Losing Votes in 2018 (UNE).....	29

Trump Warns House Republicans: Repeal Health Law
or Lose Your Seats (UNE)..... 30
 Editorial : A Defining Health Vote 30
 With health-care vote, Republicans seek to prove they
 can get things done 31

Trump to GOP critics of health care bill: ‘I’m gonna
 come after you’ (UNE)..... 32
 Trump Lays Plans to Reverse Obama’s Climate
 Change Legacy (UNE)..... 33

FRANCE - EUROPE

**The
New York
Times**

Marine Le Pen Sharpens Attack on Emmanuel Macron in French Debate

Adam Nossiter

PARIS — The French far-right leader Marine Le Pen clashed sharply with her probable presidential opponent, the centrist Emmanuel Macron, over immigration, integration and France's role in the world, during a marathon televised debate Monday night, a vivid prelude to the election battle to come.

Facing off for the first time in a five-candidate debate that stretched for three and a half hours, Ms. Le Pen and Mr. Macron offered the starkest of contrasts, with the National Front leader providing a dark picture of a France besieged by immigrants and Islam, and her rival preaching conciliation.

The debate also included the three other main contenders — the Socialist Benoît Hamon, the Republicans' François Fillon, and the far-left candidate Jean-Luc Mélenchon — but it was the fight between Mr. Macron and Ms. Le Pen that riveted attention.

Mr. Macron, a former economy minister who founded a political movement centered on jump-starting France's stagnant economy, but who has never held an elected office, appeared flustered at times as Ms. Le Pen displayed a mocking smile.

The first round of voting in the presidential election will be on April 23, and the top two candidates will advance to the second round on May 7. Opinion polls show that Mr. Macron and Ms. Le Pen are the most likely to make it to that runoff — a result that would be a stunning rebuke for France's two main political parties, the Socialists and the Republicans.

Ms. Le Pen, inheritor of the anti-immigrant, populist National Front party from her father, concentrated her fire Monday night on her younger opponent.

Mr. Macron, 39, has advanced more by offering a fresh face than by political savvy, and Ms. Le Pen, 48, sought to exploit his vulnerability, forcing him to define himself in opposition to her strident positions.

She accused Mr. Macron of supporting the "burkini," the full-body swimsuit at the center of a rancorous debate last summer over displays of the Muslim faith.

"We've got Islamists in our country," Ms. Le Pen said. "The demands are incessant," she said, citing food and clothing.

An unsettled Mr. Macron shot back: "I'm not putting words in *your* mouth. I don't need a ventriloquist."

"The trap you are falling into, Madame Le Pen, with your provocations, is to divide society," he said, adding that she was making "enemies out of more than four million French men and women whose religion happens to be Islam."

The other three candidates present Monday night tried to get shots in at the two front-runners.

Mr. Fillon was once favored to win the election, but he has been wounded by a series of scandals, most notably charges of embezzlement over allegations that he put family members on the government payroll for nonexistent jobs.

He sought during the debate to project a reassuring image of gravity, but he was forced to acknowledge that he "might have made some mistakes." Most recently, he was accused of accepting two suits worth 13,000 euros, or about \$14,000, from a political fixer.

That has left Mr. Fillon vulnerable to sly insinuations about his ethics. Mr. Hamon, for instance, pointedly described himself as someone who would be "an honest and fair president," free from the influence of "money and lobbies."

Mr. Hamon, the Socialist candidate, has promised a guaranteed "universal income" and has spoken of cutting the already reduced French workweek, but his chances are thought to be lowered by the presence of Mr. Mélenchon, whose positions are largely similar.

Ms. Le Pen, who also faces accusations related to fictional jobs, accused Mr. Mélenchon of being a "Robespierre" when he called on voters to "reward the virtuous and punish those who don't seem so."

Mr. Macron, for his part, projected an image of innocence and virtue, and Ms. Le Pen aimed directly for it, with the most savage blast of the evening aimed at his reputation for speaking at length but saying little.

After a windy declaration by Mr. Macron on protecting France's "independence," Ms. Le Pen, whose campaign is centered on a withdrawal from the European Union, mockingly repeated the word before firing back.

"You've spoken for seven minutes, and I have no idea what you said," she said. "You haven't said anything. Every time you talk, you take a little of this, and a little of that, and you never settle on anything."

**THE WALL
STREET
JOURNAL**

Fugitive Oussama Atar Spurs Worries Over New Brussels Terror Attack

Julian E. Barnes
and Natalia

Drozdiak

March 21, 2017 1:34 p.m. ET

BRUSSELS—U.S. and Belgian officials have grown increasingly worried about the prospect that a key figure behind the 2016 Brussels bombings is plotting a new terror attack, according to people briefed on the investigation.

The Brussels bombings—which killed 32 people and injured hundreds more, some with life-altering injuries—took place one year ago. As the anniversary approached, anxiety has grown among some officials about a follow-up attack.

Investigators see Oussama Atar, a Belgian national who served time in Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison until the

Belgian government and others petitioned for his release, as having the motivation and possibly the means to organize a new attack or carry one out himself. Mr. Atar is believed to be in Syria, and as pressure mounts on Islamic State there, officials said, he is likely to grow more desperate.

For months, Belgian police have been conducting raids on the homes of Mr. Atar's relatives in an effort to learn more about his role in the Brussels attacks and about any plans he may be elaborating for a new strike. As his profile has risen with investigators, U.S. officials said, so has the prospect that he could feel he needs to act swiftly.

Belgium moved to freeze his assets in November, and both Belgium and France have issued warrants for his arrest in recent months.

Mr. Atar is now thought by European and U.S. investigators to have played a role from Syria in organizing both the Brussels attacks and the earlier Paris attacks on Nov. 13, 2015, in which 130 people were killed. A laptop used by the Brussels attackers had a recording on it in which Mr. Atar is heard advising on targets and on producing the explosives used, according to a Belgian official.

"No one really knows his exact role, but he is believed now to be one of the main coordinators behind the Paris attacks and the Brussels attacks," said Pieter Van Ostaeyen, a Belgium-based terrorism researcher and expert on radicalization.

Mr. Atar, a 32-year-old Belgian of Moroccan ancestry, was once detained by the U.S. military at the

Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq on suspicion of working with Islamic extremists operating in Ramadi. Like many detainees, he was later transferred to Iraqi custody. Sentenced to 10 years in prison, he was freed in 2012 after the Belgian government and human-rights groups pressed the Iraqi government for his release on health grounds.

A small stash of assault rifles allegedly hidden by the Brussels attackers a year ago also poses a potential threat as they could be used by Mr. Atar or others, according to U.S. counterterrorism officials. While investigators said there is no shortage of assault weapons in Belgium, in the wrong hands the cache could do a lot of damage, according to people briefed on the investigation.

Since last summer, U.S. and Belgian investigators have run down repeated tips that Mr. Atar had returned to Belgium, but no reports have been corroborated. People briefed on the investigation said Mr. Atar could try to make his way back to Belgium as Islamic State's position in Syria weakens.

A U.S. official said Mr. Atar, now the most-wanted suspected Belgian terrorist, has displayed "a sense of arrogance" about his ability to slip back into the country undetected despite the manhunt for him, but didn't offer details on how that attitude had become apparent.

As the military campaign against Islamic State ramps up, Mr. Atar may calculate he will be killed or captured if he remains there, according to U.S. officials and Belgian terror experts.

"If people think they are going to go down in the coming days, they begin thinking they want to go out on their own terms," said a U.S. official. "He

could try a last act of defiance."

Mr. Atar "has a long history with jihad and he is someone who seems to be clever," said Claude Moniquet, a counterterrorism expert and head of the European Strategic Intelligence Center, a Brussels-based think tank. "I think he would most likely be involved in something big."

While Mr. Atar remains at large, the other perpetrators of the Belgian attacks of March 22, 2016, were either killed in the bombings or arrested by police.

In last year's attacks, suicide bombers Najim Laachraoui and Ibrahim el-Bakraoui detonated bombs at the city's international airport, killing 16 people. About an hour later, el-Bakraoui's brother, Khalid, detonated an explosion at a Brussels subway stop, killing another 16 people.

Belgian authorities arrested Mohamed Abrini, who had been wanted in connection with the Paris

attacks, and named him as the third airport bomber, who fled after not triggering his device. Belgian authorities also have charged Osama Krayem in connection with an aborted attempt to detonate another bomb in the subway system that day.

While authorities have considered trying Mr. Atar in absentia, a Belgian official said authorities aren't likely to be able to gather enough evidence to convict him, at least not until the major combat operations against Islamic State in Syria and Iraq have finished.

Officials are also still hunting the cache of weapons first revealed by Mr. Abrini. Soon after his arrest, he told investigators the Brussels attack plotters once hoped to use three assault rifles, which he indicated had been given to another jihadist and hidden somewhere in Belgium. The weapons, officials have said, were different from those found by police after a shootout a week before the attack.

While France and Germany have been hit with multiple high-profile attacks over the past year, Belgium has escaped a significant follow-on attack. Belgian officials say that is due partly to good investigative work and partly to luck.

In some ways, a year after the terror attacks, Belgium has returned to normal, with people gathering at cafes and concerts, venues shunned for a time after the attack.

But in other ways the aftermath lingers. Armed soldiers still roam the streets and subway systems. Tourism is down significantly. Alerts over suspicious packages shut down squares and shopping areas regularly.

Appeared in the Mar. 22, 2017, print edition as 'Fugitive Heightens Belgium Terror Worries.'

The Washington Post Editorial : 's legitimate — and what's not — about Trump's criticisms of Germany

PERHAPS THE best that can be said about the meeting between President Trump and German Chancellor Angela Merkel last week, and the parallel session of the Group of 20 finance ministers in Germany over the weekend, is that everyone got through them. German-American relations are at a low ebb, in part due to Mr. Trump's excoriation of German trade surpluses, which his aides have attributed to currency manipulation and other purportedly unfair practices. Mr. Trump compounded the bad atmosphere by blasting Germany on Twitter for allegedly owing the United States and the Atlantic alliance "vast" sums for its defense.

Before this gets totally out of hand, it is probably worth reviewing what is legitimate about Mr. Trump's critique and what is not. Ms. Merkel's own defense minister has acknowledged that Germany can and should do more to meet the NATO defense spending target of 2 percent of economic output

per year. That's true even if it is bogus, legally and economically, to speak of a German debt to the United States. Why Mr. Trump would have spread his mistaken concept on Twitter, in bullying language to boot, after the Germans had spoken in conciliatory terms on this point is no clearer than the rationale for any of his other outbursts on social media.

On the matter of trade, however, Germany has been less inclined to acknowledge the reasonable views of critics — even when the questions emanate from far cooler heads than the Trump administration. Indeed, it was the Obama administration Treasury Department that first took aim at Berlin's chronic huge surpluses (now roughly 9 percent of gross domestic product) in its October 2013 semiannual report on international trade, stopping just short of a direct currency-manipulation accusation against Germany. Nobel Prize-winning economist Paul Krugman, the

European Commission and the International Monetary Fund have all repeatedly called upon Germany to import more and export less — on the grounds that this would help its European partners find more markets for their goods and grow out of their respective debt crises.

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Germany has increased reliance on growth through domestic demand since the 2013 Obama administration report — slightly. One cause of greater spending on goods and services, as it happens, was Ms. Merkel's decision to house, feed and educate nearly 1 million asylum seekers in 2015 — something Mr. Trump might have considered before condemning her during his campaign. But there is more, much more, that Germany could contribute to the cause of intra-European and

global economic rebalancing, in particular by investing in infrastructure. Berlin nevertheless resists, fiercely, out of a stubborn, almost dogmatic commitment to budget-balancing and trade surpluses.

Frustrating as U.S.-German dealings on this point were for his predecessor, Mr. Trump's attempt to bludgeon Berlin into submission has proved counterproductive. Even if it were not an election year, Ms. Merkel could not capitulate to an American president who is profoundly unpopular among her voters. Instead, she is portraying Germany as a defender of free trade and trying to rally Japan and China to the cause, a job made easier by Mr. Trump's embrace of openly protectionist thinking. Sometimes in international politics, what counts is not the argument you make, but how you make it, and Ms. Merkel is proceeding accordingly. Smart lady.

The Washington Post More than 6,000 migrants rescued in Mediterranean amid surge on dangerous sea route

<https://www.facebook.com/michael.birnbaum1>

BRUSSELS — More than 6,000 migrants have been rescued in the Mediterranean Sea in recent days while attempting to make the

dangerous crossing from North Africa to Europe, an official said Tuesday, marking the resumption of a stubborn flow of people fleeing poverty and war.

The surging figures suggest that growing numbers of migrants,

refugees and others — many from Africa and the Middle East — are trying to make the sea passage to Europe as the weather warms and smugglers increase operations.

The influx of people has become a major political issue in Europe, as

anti-immigrant populists crusade against mainstream leaders and look to capture power in France and make gains in Germany in elections this year. European Union leaders have signed deals with Libya and some of the sub-Saharan countries that are sources of most of the

current flow, but the root causes of the migration are as intractable as ever.

[Italy may be the next big migrant route]

The Mediterranean has become the main corridor for migrants trying to reach Europe aboard smugglers' boats from Libya and elsewhere after authorities largely choked off sea routes between Turkey and Greece last year.

But the dramatic spike in Mediterranean rescues since late last week suggests even greater migrant traffic ahead, said Joel Millman, a spokesman for the Geneva-based International Organization for Migration, which monitors migrant flows and provides direct aid in refugee camps, detention centers and elsewhere. "This is typical of spring, getting very busy," he said. "But it's not typical to have the numbers be so high this early and the corresponding deaths that go with it."

An estimated 500 migrants have drowned in the Mediterranean this year, and more than 20,000 have been intercepted at sea and brought to Italy and other European ports since January, Millman said. He said that if current trends hold, the traffic across the Mediterranean will be higher than it was last year but lower than in 2015, the peak year.

In the past few days, more than 6,000 migrants have been rescued, including about 3,300 taken to Italy and others found on overcrowded and foundering vessels off Libya, the base for many smuggling networks.

[Inside a smugglers' haven in the Sahara]

The consistent flows are a sign that the deals European leaders have signed with African nations to try to restrict migration have not had a significant effect. Those deals link development assistance with the African countries' efforts to keep their citizens from making the

perilous journey to Europe, especially for economic opportunities. Refugees fleeing war are considered a separate category.

Most of the migrants taking the route from Libya to Italy come from sub-Saharan nations such as Nigeria, the Ivory Coast and Guinea. Syrians favored the safer, shorter route from Turkey to Greece, although that traffic has largely halted.

E.U. leaders last month agreed to give Libya \$216 million to help bolster the fragile nation's coast guard and navy so that they can stop smugglers' boats inside their territorial waters. Europe also said it would help fund refugee camps in Libya and assist migrants who want to return to their home nations.

[Why the number of refugees drowning in the Mediterranean keeps rising]

Today's WorldView

What's most important from where the world meets Washington

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But the high migration flows suggest that smuggling networks continue to operate at full capacity, with pent-up demand more than enough to mitigate any decrease due to the migration deals.

Millman said the traffic is likely to continue so long as legal routes to Europe remain limited, given the demographics of Europe and sub-Saharan Africa.

"Europe is desperate for cheap labor, and sub-Saharan Africans are desperate for these jobs," he said. "Everybody has to decide what kind of system they want: a chaotic one that enriches criminals or an orderly one."

Murphy reported from Washington.

**The
New York
Times**

Kitsantonis

The fight to fill the impending vacancy is likely to kick off a wave of jockeying among member states. The head of the Eurogroup plays an intensely political role, setting the tone for a bloc of ministers that presses individual governments to shore up their finances and grants political approval for bailouts.

Candidates are already being discussed, including Spain's center-right economy minister and a Socialist member of the Slovak government. But whatever minister prevails, Germany, the region's heavyweight economy, is still expected to dominate on issues like Greece's bailout and regional budgetary rigor.

"Dijsselbloem has essentially been Germany's agent in the Eurogroup," said Mujtaba Rahman, the Europe director of the Eurasia Group, a political risk consultancy.

Mr. Dijsselbloem had been his country's finance minister for a matter of months when he took over as head of the Eurogroup in early 2013, and his tenure had a rocky start.

An expert in agricultural economics who studied in Ireland and lives in the Dutch countryside, he incited controversy by endorsing a bailout of Cyprus that forced losses on many ordinary depositors.

Though Mr. Dijsselbloem conceded that he made mistakes, and the

After Dutch Election, Eurogroup Leader's Fate Looks in Doubt

James Kanter
and Niki

Cypriot government agreed to a revised deal that put a greater burden on richer depositors, the stage was set for even tenser negotiations with Greece.

By early 2015, Greece had been subject to years of tough austerity, and an increasing number of people were fed up with the seemingly never-ending belt-tightening measures sought by creditors. Thousands flocked to exuberant rallies against the country's lenders.

In January of that year, Greeks voted in Syriza, a far-left party that campaigned on a broad pledge to roll back years of austerity measures, restoring cuts to salaries and pensions and securing a write-off of the country's huge debt burden. At the center of that effort was Yanis Varoufakis, Greece's combative finance minister.

At a joint news conference with Mr. Dijsselbloem in Athens, Mr. Varoufakis flatly rejected working with the so-called troika — the European Commission, the International Monetary Fund and the European Central Bank — which had jointly demanded spending cuts and tax increases in exchange for loans.

Those comments prompted a stony-faced Mr. Dijsselbloem to admonish his Greek counterpart for effectively seeking to derail the talks.

Behind closed doors, the atmosphere was even worse. In one meeting of finance ministers in February 2015, the pair called each other liars and nearly came to

blows, Pierre Moscovici, the European commissioner in charge of economic and financial affairs, told a French journalist.

Then, after Mr. Varoufakis left a pivotal meeting in late June, the Eurogroup's finance ministers continued to confer. Mr. Dijsselbloem said the session would proceed "without the Greek colleague," declining to even use his counterpart's name.

The clashes between the two men inspired a Dutch rap video, and although Mr. Varoufakis was replaced by Euclid Tsakalotos in July 2015, he remained critical in his references to Mr. Dijsselbloem, writing in April 2016 that they were never going to have "a beautiful friendship."

Ultimately, the Eurogroup failed to reach a deal with Greece, and it fell to national leaders like Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany and Prime Minister Mark Rutte of Holland to negotiate an agreement. Athens was forced to create a 50 billion euro, or \$53.6 billion, privatization fund to help pay down debt in exchange for an international bailout, its third since 2010.

Mr. Dijsselbloem certainly presided over more than an unending series of crises.

The eurozone has expanded under his watch, with Latvia and Lithuania joining in 2014 and 2015. Eurogroup meetings have also run far more smoothly than under his predecessor, Jean-Claude Juncker, the current president of the

European Commission, according to finance ministers and European officials.

And since the European Central Bank introduced an effective backstop in 2012, buying bonds from eurozone countries with distressed economies, the Eurogroup has also allowed countries like France and Italy significant fiscal leeway.

"Dijsselbloem is widely perceived as a good chair of the Eurogroup who has exercised a steady hand," said Guntram B. Wolff, the director of Bruegel, a Brussels think tank.

But Greece has loomed large over Mr. Dijsselbloem's tenure, and is likely to dominate his successor's priorities.

The country's debt still stands at 180 percent of gross domestic product, and nearly a quarter of the population is unemployed. The prospects for economic recovery remain bleak. Fearful of the political uncertainty caused by seemingly unending bailout talks, foreign investors have been wary of putting money into Greece.

More recently, Mr. Dijsselbloem has tried to forge a more equitable policy for the country, pushing for meaningful ways to ease its debt burden. Last year, he drafted a three-stage debt-relief plan that was eventually accepted, albeit only after it was watered down in the face of opposition from Germany.

The Dutch politician was "very austere" at the outset of talks with

the newly elected Syriza government in 2015, said Georgios Kyrtos, a conservative Greek member of the European Parliament. But he became "more constructive" as time went on, and Mr. Kyrtos described him as "extremely capable."

As a result, views of him improved. Anger toward Ms. Merkel or

Wolfgang Schäuble, Germany's finance minister, is much fiercer within Greece, and Mr. Dijsselbloem's relations with Mr. Tsakalotos are a world apart from his confrontations with Mr. Varoufakis.

And while many in the country celebrated when his Dutch Labor Party suffered heavy losses at the

polls, several Greeks were circumspect about who might replace him and whether such a swap would have any impact.

Germany holds outside influence within the European Union, and in the Eurogroup in particular. Changing the bloc's leader is unlikely to have much impact on decision-making in Berlin.

"He's just a yes-man of Europe," said Yiannis Garoutsos, 52, an electrician in Athens. "He was just doing Germany's dirty work."

"They'll find someone just as accommodating to replace him."

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Emre Peker

Updated March 21, 2017 1:53 p.m. ET

BRUSSELS—European Union and Japan's leaders vowed to fast-track negotiations in an effort to sign a trade pact as soon as this year, seeking to counter U.S. protectionism while boosting exports to bolster tepid growth in their economies.

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe met with European Council President Donald Tusk and European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker in Brussels on Tuesday, pledging to deepen economic, political and security ties in an effort to jointly address global challenges.

The leaders described their prospective free-trade agreement as a flag-bearer for global commerce when protectionism was growing. They didn't mention President Donald Trump by name but his criticism of multilateral agreements has unsettled U.S. trading partners.

"We believe this agreement is necessary...because we believe in free, fair and rules-based trade," Mr. Juncker said. "We will continue to look out toward the world, rather than return to isolationism."

Mr. Abe's visit to the EU capital follows last week's Group of 20 meeting, where the U.S. pressured the world's largest economies to

EU, Japan Speed Up Trade Talks to Counter Threat of U.S. Protectionism

scrap a stance against protectionism. The Japanese premier's trip also takes place a week before Britain triggers talks to exit from the EU, undermining a 60-year push toward trade-led integration spanning 28 countries.

"In the midst of strengthening protectionist trends, I find it important for Japan and the EU to cooperate with the United States as well, to show to the world the flag of free trade as a model," Mr. Abe said during a joint briefing with Messrs. Juncker and Tusk.

While Mr. Abe said he wanted a trade deal with the EU as soon as possible, such a pact could prompt the Trump administration to demand Japan extend the same concessions to the U.S.

Japanese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Mariko Kaneko, who accompanied Mr. Abe, said after the premier's meeting with EU counterparts that the government was not worried about American stipulations based on a deal with Brussels.

"Bilateral negotiations are based on the balance of both sides," Ms. Kaneko said. "Japan-EU economic relations and Japan-U.S. economic relations, it's not the same."

Tokyo also heavily relies on Washington not only for Japan's economy, but also for its defense against an increasingly assertive

China and the rogue nation of North Korea.

In a nod to a key Japanese security issue, Mr. Juncker said the EU would continue to apply sanctions against North Korea, calling its quest for nuclear weapons a major concern and adding that Brussels was looking into additional restrictions to pressure Pyongyang.

With €125 billion (\$134.3 billion) of exports and imports in 2016, however, Japan and EU's main agenda item was boosting trade, with Brussels seeking to clinch its biggest ever tariff-lifting agreement.

Yet the negotiations, launched March 2013, remain fraught with thorny topics, led by Japanese car exports to the EU and European sales of agricultural products to Japan.

An EU official said Monday that the bloc could provide duty-free access to the European market for Japanese automotive firms, so long as the arrangement doesn't create "undue disruptions" for the local industry.

"Whether we do it or not will depend on the quality of this deal overall, I'm confident that we can get there," the EU official said.

The European Automobile Manufacturers' Association said that even with tariffs on the car trade reduced to zero, exports from Europe could still face nontariff

barriers to trade with Japan as it does in South Korea, with which the bloc already has a trade deal.

On agriculture, European officials lauded a push by Japan to reform by as soon as the end of June its dairy sector, where trade barriers deter exports of leading European products, such as cheese.

"Dairy, as far as I know, is going to be the last point negotiated as that is a key item for both EU and Japan," said Alexander Anton, secretary-general of Brussels-based European Dairy Association.

Yet while the EU vies to take over leadership from the U.S. in promoting open markets, pushing for deals from Japan to Mexico, European governments also face domestic backlash to international economic deals negotiated by Brussels. Local opposition in Belgium almost derailed a pact with Canada, a threat that would also loom over a trade agreement with Japan.

"Of course they were concerned when they saw that," the EU official said about the difficulties of adapting the Canada trade deal. "I think the Japanese have perhaps more faith in what we can do than we have ourselves."

The New York Times

Turkey Halts Campaign in Germany to Court Voters

Patrick Kingsley

ISTANBUL — Turkey's governing party said on Tuesday that it would no longer send representatives to Germany to campaign for a constitutional amendment to drastically strengthen the Turkish president's powers, raising the possibility of a de-escalation of a dispute between the two countries.

The decision is a change in direction by the Turkish government of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, which has frequently tried to send surrogates to Germany in recent

weeks and subsequently accused Germany of Nazism for refusing to allow them to campaign freely.

About 1.4 million German residents have the right to vote in Turkey in an April 16 referendum on whether to expand Mr. Erdogan's powers, but the president's Justice and Development Party will now no longer try to directly court their votes.

The party's decision follows a stern warning from the German chancellor, Angela Merkel, who on Monday said that Mr. Erdogan's

Nazi comparisons must stop "without ifs or buts."

Mehdi Eker, a Justice and Development lawmaker and one of the party's deputy chairmen, said the decision was pragmatic rather than a gesture of good will. "Since they have officially decided to ban or to make it difficult" to campaign in Germany, "that's why we do not want to send our colleagues from now on," Mr. Eker said in a telephone interview.

Justice and Development officials may continue to campaign

elsewhere in Europe, Mr. Eker added, including in the Netherlands, which barred one Turkish minister from entry and expelled another this month.

Mr. Eker also refused to say whether the move would be accompanied by less heated language from party officials, who recently threatened to send a new wave of migrants to Europe as revenge for the behavior of German and Dutch officials. "It is not necessary to say that we will take steps back or steps forward," Mr. Eker said.

In Germany, a pro-Erdogan organization, the Union of European Turkish Democrats, also told news outlets of the decision not to hold more events with visiting Turkish politicians. The announcement was welcomed by nervous German politicians who had grown increasingly concerned in recent days that Turkey's conflicts might spill into German streets.

The change by Turkey followed the clearest warning yet from Ms. Merkel for it to stop using language about Nazi tactics. As she spoke on Monday, her foreign minister also met Turkish business executives. Germany is Turkey's largest European trading partner, but it was not clear whether that status played a role in either Monday's talks or Tuesday's announcement.

Elsewhere in Turkey on Tuesday, Mr. Erdogan did not seem to have softened his tone. At a rally in Ankara, the capital, he said that Europe was racist, fascist and cruel, and he suggested that Turkey was no longer interested in joining the European Union.

Mr. Erdogan has been accused of hypocrisy for his criticism of European politicians. Inside Turkey,

his own opponents say they are denied the rights of assembly that Mr. Erdogan expects his allies to be granted in Europe.

INTERNATIONAL

**The
New York
Times**

A Test for Tillerson, and for U.S. Strategy on ISIS

Gardiner Harris

The conclave is the first major diplomatic event hosted by Mr. Tillerson. And like a debutante at a coming-out party, Mr. Tillerson will face intense scrutiny about his status from a crowd that is expert in gauging power.

At this point in his tenure at the State Department's helm, Mr. Tillerson has yet to persuade anyone that he has much influence over Mr. Trump or the direction of American policy. His inability or unwillingness to choose his own deputy, protect his department from proposed deep budget cuts, attend meetings with foreign leaders at the White House or effectively manage the narrative of his foreign trips all suggest that he may be a marginal player in an administration dominated by the top White House advisers Stephen K. Bannon and Jared Kushner.

Wednesday will be Mr. Tillerson's first good opportunity to change that impression, which is essential if he wants to be included in the world's most exclusive councils of power.

But managing a meeting of 67 counterparts, many of whom he has yet to meet personally, would test

even the most seasoned diplomat, and it involves the kind of complex multiparty haggling that few chief executives know how to handle. Mr. Tillerson was chief executive of Exxon Mobil, where quiet one-on-one deal making was the rule.

His only genuine multilateral meeting as secretary so far was a February gathering in Germany, attended by foreign ministers from countries in the Group of 20, but he largely kept his mouth shut. This time, he must give a welcoming speech, and there will be disappointment if he fails to make any substantive pronouncements.

The problem is, Mr. Tillerson may not have much to say. During the campaign, Mr. Trump's chief foreign policy pledges were to be tougher on China and the Islamic State than President Barack Obama had been. But so far, there are few indications that Mr. Trump intends to do so as president.

Mr. Tillerson's trip last week to China was surprisingly conciliatory, and the Trump administration's effort against the Islamic State has so far been almost identical to Mr. Obama's, with a heavy reliance on supporting indigenous armies to fight their own wars instead of

deploying large numbers of American forces to far-flung hot spots.

Indeed, Mr. Tillerson has already explained that one reason his department should see its budget slashed is that he expects the United States to be engaged in fewer foreign conflicts, not more.

After an Oval Office meeting on Monday with Mr. Trump, Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi of Iraq told an audience at the United States Institute of Peace that he had been "given assurances that the support will not only continue but will accelerate" in Baghdad's battle against the Islamic State.

The word "accelerate" is likely to be bandied about quite a bit in the next few days at Foggy Bottom, and it is one that Mark Toner, the State Department's veteran spokesman, used repeatedly on Monday to describe the Trump administration's plans.

Promising that "there's going to be some new ideas put on the table," Mr. Toner said Wednesday's meeting was intended "to accelerate and focus more on how we can accelerate our efforts."

Some counterterrorism experts said they hoped that a promised acceleration was genuine.

"I was not a particular fan of what the last administration did, which I would describe as relying on passivity, proxies and special forces," said Michael E. Leiter, who stepped down in 2011 as head of the National Counterterrorism Center. "What I hope we see in this administration is selective, deeper engagements that give greater confidence to our allies so our partnerships are more meaningful."

The Trump administration faces some difficult decisions in the coming months. These include how to safeguard the civilian population in the northern Iraqi city of Mosul, now under attack, from further devastation; whether to include Kurdish forces in Syria in the coming attack on Raqqa, despite bitter opposition from Turkey's government; and how to bolster Libya's fragile government to resist a growing threat from the Islamic State.

**The
Washington
Post**

A rebel push on Damascus shows that Syria's war is far from over

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BEIRUT — An unexpected rebel push on Damascus has brought Syria's civil war to the heart of its capital for the first time in years, spreading panic among residents and serving as a reminder that the conflict is far from over.

Streets emptied and many shops and schools were closed for a third day Tuesday as battles raged on the eastern edge of the city, where the rebels launched their surprise

assault over the weekend. Mortar shells crashed into residential neighborhoods, jets streaked overhead, and the rattle of gunfire plunged Damascus back onto the front lines of a war that has raged since 2011.

The rebel offensive seems unlikely to lead to any sustained advances into President Bashar al-Assad's most vital and best-defended stronghold. Loyalist forces scrambled troops from other areas to defend the capital and appeared to have halted the rebel advance just beyond Abbasiyeen Square, a

major gateway just a few miles from the historic Old City of Damascus.

[Syria's war isn't stopping for Trump]

The fighting marked the first time since 2012 that rebel forces have advanced so close to the center of Damascus, highlighting the continuing fragility of Assad's hold on power despite nearly a year and a half of steady gains — aided by Russia's military intervention — that appeared to have sealed the outcome of the war.

It is now becoming clear that although the rebels lack the capacity to topple Assad, Assad's forces also lack the capacity to defeat the rebels, said Andrew J. Tabler of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

"This doesn't mean the regime is going to be defeated. But their forces are just too thin," he said. "They stand in one place, they contract in another, they shift forces to another, and this has been going on for years."

The offensive called into question the viability of Russian-led efforts to stabilize the country by securing a negotiated settlement, a goal that remains as elusive as Assad's repeated vows to regain control of the entire country. Stalled peace talks are due to resume in Geneva on Thursday, but the upsurge in fighting cast further doubt on the chances for progress.

The United States has dropped out of the diplomacy pending a decision by the Trump administration on its Syria policy, leaving peace efforts adrift.

[Mounting claims of civilian deaths after U.S. targets al-Qaeda in Syria]

A Russian-sponsored cease-fire that took hold in December was already fraying badly, and is now in shreds. The Damascus offensive was preceded by days of intense government airstrikes, aided by Russian warplanes, in the northern province of Idlib, the rebels' biggest remaining stronghold, according to activists and residents. Dozens of civilians have been killed in the strikes, reviving fears that the

government is planning an onslaught there on the scale of the massive assault that killed thousands last year in the city of Aleppo.

Government forces had been steadily advancing into the shrinking enclaves of rebel-held territory surrounding the capital, despite the cease-fire. The immediate goal of the rebel offensive was to defend a besieged foothold in the suburb of Qaboun, which was at risk of being overrun, and link it with Jobar, a bigger enclave on the eastern edge of the city, rebel commanders said.

More broadly, the assault is also intended to pressure Russia to make the Assad government observe the cease-fire, said Wael Olwan, a spokesman for Faylaq al-Rahman, the main rebel group participating in the offensive. "By adopting the strategy of defense by offense, hopefully we will force Russia to force the regime to commit to the cease-fire agreement," he said.

[U.S. Marines arrive in Syria to join fight for Raqqa]

There was no immediate sign that the strategy was working. New airstrikes were launched late Tuesday against the city of Idlib — by Russian warplanes, according to activists in the area, although that could not be independently confirmed.

Rebel leaders see Russia, now the main power broker in Syria, as trying to push them into a peace deal that would help Assad reclaim all of Syria.

Today's WorldView

What's most important from where the world meets Washington

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"The problem is Russia's double standards," Olwan said. "While the Russian foreign minister talks about a political solution, their military bases on the ground are doing the opposite. They are taking part in strikes that contradict what they are saying about a political solution."

The rebels also remain hamstrung by factional disputes, said Aron

Lund, a fellow with the Century Foundation. The moderate Faylaq al-Rahman teamed up with units of the more extreme Tahrir al-Sham to launch the Damascus assault. But the biggest Damascus faction, Jaish al-Islam, is a fierce rival of the group that led the offensive and has not joined the fighting — just one example of how splits have thwarted the rebels throughout the six-year-old crisis.

Were the rebels to unite, "that could mean real trouble for the government," Lund said. "There is still a lot of fight left in the insurgency. But only if the government somehow cracks from within or screws up in the most spectacular fashion will they have a chance to break out and challenge Assad's hold on the capital."

Zakaria Zakaria in Istanbul and Heba Habib in Stockholm contributed to this report.

The Washington Post Yazidis who suffered genocide are fleeing again, but this time not from the Islamic State (UNE)

<https://www.facebook.com/lovedaymorris?fref=ts>

SINJAR, Iraq — Relatives collapsed in grief as the coffin of an 18-year-old Yazidi fighter was carried to a small temple at the base of Mount Sinjar.

Salam Mukhaibir's death this month, along with four other Yazidi fighters, marked the latest dark turn for an Iraqi minority sect that has suffered genocide at the hands of the Islamic State.

But the men were not killed fighting the militants. They died in clashes with Kurdish peshmerga forces when long-simmering rivalries erupted.

The Islamic State overran the town of Sinjar and its surroundings 2½ years ago, executing thousands of Yazidi men, whom it considers apostates. Thousands of women who were kidnapped to be used as sex slaves and their children remain missing.

But the fierce infighting among forces ostensibly meant to be battling the militants now threatens to set back efforts to recapture more land and rebuild areas reduced to rubble.

The conflagration presents a challenge for the United States, which plays a role supporting both Kurdish factions involved —

providing military assistance to them, or their affiliates, in the fight against the Islamic State. It also marks a bleak bellwether for the prospects of peace after territory is finally won back from the Islamic State. In neighboring Syria, U.S. troops have already been diverted to prevent warring between rival forces they support.

At a strategic crossroads between Syria, Turkey and Iraq, the traditional Yazidi heartland has become a flash point for Kurdish political rivalries, fueled by the wider competing interests of Turkey, Iran and the Iraqi government in Baghdad.

"We feel like a toy in the hands of the politicians," Khalaf Bahri, a Yazidi religious sheikh, said before performing the burial rites for the young man, whose body was carried to a cemetery on the mountainside. "Yazidis are wounded and still bleeding. We still have our sisters and daughters and wives in the hands of Islamic State, but now this."

The slain Yazidi fighters belonged to the Sinjar Resistance Units, a local force affiliated with the military wing of the Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK, a separatist group from neighboring Turkey. The United States has been providing arms to a coalition of forces over the border in Syria led by another PKK affiliate.

Some fighters with the Yazidi group carried U.S.-made M-16 rifles. They said the firearms were captured from Islamic State militants or purchased on the black market.

On the other side of the confrontation was the Rojava Peshmerga, largely Syrian Kurds under the command of Kurdistan's regional government, which the U.S.-led coalition is also supporting in its fight against the Islamic State. They fled to Iraq at the beginning of Syria's civil war and have been blocked from returning home.

Both sides accuse the other of shooting first.

Kurdish President Masoud Barzani has repeatedly asked the PKK to leave Iraq. But many Yazidis credit the group with saving them when peshmerga forces charged with protecting them abandoned their posts with little fight during the Islamic State's onslaught in 2014.

Tens of thousands of Yazidis became trapped atop Mount Sinjar as they sought refuge there. Those who did not make it ended up as Islamic State captives or were killed and thrown into one of the dozens of mass graves that surround the mountain.

The plight of those stuck on the mountain and surrounded by militants sparked the first aerial bombardment in Iraq by the U.S.-led

coalition against Islamic State fighters. But it was the PKK and its Syrian affiliate that fought to open a land route to allow Yazidis to escape on foot.

Since then, the PKK has put down roots, opening schools and training Yazidi fighters. Pictures of Abdullah Ocalan, the group's figurehead, are ubiquitous in the area. A shrine on the mountainside, illuminated at night, is dedicated to more than 200 fighters from the PKK and aligned factions who died fighting here.

To Kurdistan's semiautonomous government in northern Iraq, Sinjar is an integral part of its territory. The Iraqi government disputes that claim. Many Yazidis consider themselves ethnically Kurdish.

After Kurdish forces recaptured the town a year and a half ago, Barzani said in a triumphant speech from the mountainside that the Kurdish flag would be the only one to fly there. Since then, his party has expanded its influence, but the PKK has stayed put.

"We are vulnerable and in a weak position, so whoever gives us a piece of bread, a house, a weapon — people will take it," said Bahri, the Yazidi sheikh at the funeral, who is aligned with Yazidi-PKK forces. "Our leaders have sold themselves for money."

'We have been betrayed'

As the rival sides vie for influence, thousands of Yazidis who took up arms against the Islamic State have also joined the peshmerga.

Hayder Shesho, who heads a force of Yazidi fighters, is integrating 1,000 of them into peshmerga ranks.

Shesho said he has decided to merge his forces with the peshmerga because it was the “only open door.” He said he was arrested in 2015 in what he describes as an attempt to “pressure” him.

“Yes, we have been betrayed by them. Yes, we have been abandoned by them,” he said of the Kurdish regional government’s ruling party. “But we are Kurds.”

He said the U.S.-led coalition should “take responsibility” and unite Yazidis, calling for international forces to protect them. “No one represents the Yazidis,” he lamented.

The clashes in recent weeks have sent thousands of Yazidi families that had returned to villages fleeing once more, some back to the mountain that provided them sanctuary in 2014.

“We’re poor; we’ve been through genocide,” said Gowri Mitchka, who was putting up tents with 20 members of her extended family. “We don’t want to be a part of this. We need help.”

Farther up the road, on the winding track that leads over the mountain, someone has spray-painted words that echo the sentiments of many here: “Yazidism unites us, the parties divide us.”

Two days after the clashes this month, the peshmerga — riding atop bulldozers — created large earthen barriers between

the two sides, and soldiers restricted traffic along the road. The other side was also building defenses.

Maj. Gen. Bahjat Taymis, a peshmerga commander, said the fighting started when Rojava Peshmerga were on a mission to cut off smuggling routes. The fighters were setting up a base on the edge of the village of Khana Sour when they were surrounded, and reinforcements that were sent in were then fired upon, he added.

The PKK said the fighting began after two of its fighters were shot dead as they tried to block the advancing peshmerga convoy. The five Yazidis died in those clashes, according to PKK and Yazidi commanders.

Shesho and PKK commanders said the decision to deploy a foreign force — the largely Syrian Rojava Peshmerga — was a deliberate provocation. Kurdistan’s government contends that it can deploy forces in its territory as it wishes.

Circumventing the barriers between the two sides involves navigating dirt tracks at the foot of the mountain. On the other side, Yazidi fighters set up new mortar positions. But instead of pointing at the Islamic State militants, they were angled toward peshmerga.

“First, we will try and solve this through dialogue, but if not we will fight them, because it’s the will of the people,” said Zardasht Shingali, a 30-year-old commander with the group. “They are distracting us from fighting the Islamic State.”

He said the opponents were not real peshmerga but “thugs.”

“We consider Sinjar part of Kurdistan, and we have no problem with the peshmerga,” he said. “But

these people are gangsters, working on a Turkish agenda.”

Turkey considers the PKK a terrorist group and has said it will not let Sinjar become a “new Qandil,” referring to the mountain range in northern Iraq that has become a hideout for PKK forces waging attacks against the Turkish state.

Others say the Sinjar Resistance Units are also influenced by outside forces, through their close relationship with the PKK and links to the Iraqi government’s popular mobilization forces, which are dominated by Iranian-backed militias.

“We will not accept a Turkish agenda or an Iranian agenda. Turkey and Iran are trying to pull Sinjar into a regional conflict, and Sinjar will not accept it,” said Mahama Khalil, the mayor of Sinjar, who belongs to the same party as Kurdistan’s president. He added that the PKK should leave.

But for the Iraqi government, the PKK presence in Sinjar provides a counterbalance to Kurdistan’s ruling party and Yazidi fighters said Baghdad paid their wages until late last year.

Blurred lines

Commanders with the Sinjar Resistance Units insist that they are independent and receive support only from their community. However, lines distinguishing it from the PKK are blurred, and Turkish and Iranian Kurds are among their ranks.

One 35-year-old Kurdish Iranian manning a checkpoint said he was moved from the PKK’s military wing to the Yazidi force about 15 months ago. A 17-year-old fighter with the group also said he was from Iran.

Agit Civiyan, a commander for the PKK’s military wing in Sinjar, said some fighters were integrated into the Yazidi ranks for “training and education” purposes. He said the PKK was ready to leave when no longer needed, but that the Yazidis still required protection.

While the infighting continues, little has been done to rebuild Sinjar — Kurdish officials say they cannot begin until the PKK leaves — and areas nearby are still under Islamic State control.

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On the mountain, Jamil Khalaf said he was tired of all sides.

“We blame them all,” he said. “They don’t care about anyone else. Why are they fighting each other when they should be liberating our villages?”

His family has been living in a tent on the mountain for 2½ years because their village, Tal Azair, is still under Islamic State control. Two of his children died when the family’s tent caught fire, and his wife’s face and arms are scarred from burns. Her sister’s husband was killed when the militants advanced on the village.

“We don’t want these people fighting on our land,” he said. “But we have no power. It’s inevitable.”

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

WASHINGTON — The United States military has begun formally investigating an American airstrike in Syria that officials said targeted dozens of Qaeda operatives at a meeting place that activists and local residents maintain was part of a religious complex where 49 civilians were killed.

United States Central Command has begun two investigations: one to determine whether there is credible evidence that civilians were killed in the strike, and another, broader inquiry into the overall operation and whether the building hit was indeed part of a complex belonging to the Omar ibn al-Khatib mosque.

U.S. Military Investigating Reports of Civilian Deaths in Syria Airstrike

Helene Cooper

Defense officials had acknowledged that the building hit in the March 16 airstrike was near a mosque, but they called it an “Al Qaeda meeting site” in Al Jinah, in Aleppo Province. Military officials said intelligence had indicated that Al Qaeda used the partially constructed community meeting hall as a gathering site and as a place to educate and indoctrinate fighters.

But the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said 49 people had been killed in what the monitoring group described as a “massacre” of civilians who were participating in religious instruction. Residents have described the building as an assembly hall and dining area for worshippers who gathered for religious lessons, and have produced photographs taken at the

site after the strike that show a black sign outside a still-standing adjoining structure that identifies it as part of the Omar ibn al-Khatib mosque.

Last week, the Pentagon released its own photograph that showed a blackened crater where a building once stood in the village. An adjoining structure appears to be largely intact, as do about a dozen vehicles on the street. A small mosque across the street appears to be unscathed.

“We take extraordinary measures to mitigate the loss of civilian life in our operations,” Eric Pahon, a Defense Department spokesman, said on Tuesday. He added that “we are aware of claims of civilian casualties.”

Col. John J. Thomas, the spokesman for Central Command, said that the credibility assessment investigation would look into the question of civilian casualties. The broader investigation, he said — called a 15-6 in military parlance — will seek to clarify the purpose of the building that was bombed, as well as whether it was used by people other than members of Al Qaeda. “We’re investigating because we would like to look into it and find out if we can learn anything,” he said.

Investigators will review the intelligence that led to the airstrike, as well as videos, photographs and other documentation. American military investigators will also try to talk to witnesses, although it is unclear whether they will be able to visit the site given the limited

number of American personnel in Syria.

Capt. Jeff Davis, another spokesman for the Defense Department, told reporters this week that the military does not strike mosques. Qaeda members and other militants are believed to have long understood that the United States' rules of engagement discourage attacks on mosques,

The New York Times

Anne Barnard

While the government still seems to be consolidating control over major population centers along Syria's western spine, it appears at a minimum likely to face a lingering rural insurgency and bombing campaigns in the cities by hard-line jihadist groups.

At the least, the rebel assaults carried a political message: that the insurgents could still disrupt life in the capital and challenge the forces of President Bashar al-Assad at several points around the country, while simultaneously attacking Islamic State fighters.

By mounting a series of simultaneous assaults around the country, the rebels seemed intent on exploiting one of the government forces' main weaknesses. While they have Russian air support and help on the ground from Iranian-trained militias, they are spread thin after six years of war and the drain of so many men fleeing the country rather than serving in the army.

It was not immediately clear if the rebels could maintain the offensive. Their forces around Damascus have been badly depleted in recent years and their territory rolled back as the government besieged districts and forced their surrender.

And the new assaults raised political concerns, in that they continue the alliance between a spectrum of rebel groups and hard-line Islamists considered terrorists by Russia and the United States.

schools and hospitals without extensive scrutiny from top-level officials. As a result, militants have often operated in these places, in the assumption that doing so affords them some protection.

But large mosques can consist of multiple buildings, used by civilians for wedding parties and religious endeavors.

The rebels are also walking a fine line with Syrian and international public opinion. To build leverage for imminent peace talks, they need to show they can still cause trouble for the government on the ground, undermining its claim that it can control territory and maintain security.

Yet, they stand to pay a huge political price if they ally themselves with groups that have been intensifying Baghdad-style insurgent attacks like the suicide bombing that killed more than 30 people last week in a historic courthouse in Damascus.

No group immediately claimed responsibility for that attack. But fighters linked to Al Qaeda did say they had carried out two suicide bombings this month that killed dozens of Iraqi pilgrims near the Old City.

Other rebel groups condemned both of those attacks.

There were reports late Tuesday of several new insurgent assaults on government territory taking place at once: one in Hama Province and another on the western outskirts of Aleppo. In recent weeks, rebels have also launched attacks in Daraa Province to the south. Until recently, fighters there had lain low at the behest of foreign sponsors including the United States, but it now appears they have either decided to defy their patrons or persuaded them to heat up the front again.

Rebel and jihadi groups were also advancing against the Islamic State

President Trump has indicated that unlike President Barack Obama, who had his White House scrutinize many military operations, he will leave more operational decision-making to the Pentagon and to American commanders in the field.

That streamlined decision-making has been welcomed by many in the military, who often expressed frustration at what they saw as a

slow decision-making process in Mr. Obama's White House. But it has raised questions about whether Mr. Trump is exercising sufficient oversight.

Resurgent Syrian Rebels Surprise Damascus With New Assaults

in the Qalamoun region, north of Damascus.

The government has been hitting rebel-held areas to the east of Damascus with air raids and artillery for more than a month, despite a nominal cease-fire that was supposed to be maintained during new rounds of peace talks in Geneva and in Astana, Kazakhstan.

None of the rebel groups in the offensive on northeast Damascus are among the ones being backed in a covert C.I.A. program. But Mohammad al-Alloush, the leader of the Army of Islam, one of the groups involved in the assault, is nominally the head opposition negotiator in the Geneva peace talks.

With their monthlong offensive, government forces appeared to be trying to further isolate the besieged suburbs of East Ghouta, hoping to eventually force the rebels there to surrender or face a grinding battle with widespread humanitarian suffering, as happened in Aleppo.

That makes the districts of Jobar and Qaboun, and neighboring Barzeh, critical territory for both sides. They are the gateway to the business and tourism center of Damascus, where relatively normal life has been a symbol of the government's continuing control over the capital during six years of conflict. For the rebels, the area contains the smuggling tunnels that help supply East Ghouta, supplementing whatever food can be grown there.

A main highway out of Damascus passes nearby, and during lulls in

the fighting when it is passable drivers survey a landscape of jagged shells of destroyed buildings.

Rebels initially gained ground in a surprise attack on Sunday. Government command posts were hit by two suicide bombs detonated by fighters from Tahrir al-Sham, the new name adopted by the Nusra Front after it claimed to shed its affiliation with Al Qaeda. Then rebel groups including Faylaq al-Sham, the Army of Islam and Ahrar al-Sham advanced.

The attacks took Damascus residents by surprise. Schools were closed for at least a day. Smoke could be seen rising over familiar landmarks. A reporter for Syrian state television, in the midst of assuring the audience that life was going on as normal in central Abasiyeen Square, flinched on air at the sound of a nearby projectile. When she was seen next, she was newly clad in a flak jacket and helmet.

The government responded in force to the initial assault. Elite units, regular troops, irregulars in jeans carrying Kalashnikovs, members of foreign militias and armored vehicles could be seen near the front line on Sunday and Monday.

They managed to take back the territory, but on Tuesday the insurgents hit back and regained much of the contested ground. Footage showed fighters with Ahrar al-Sham entering a textile factory they had just seized.



Turkey's Frightening Trifecta: ISIS, Erdogan & U.S. Nukes

Christopher Dickey

PARIS—If we're going to judge America's NATO allies by their defense spending, as President Donald Trump seems intent on doing, then Turkey should be in good odor. Its military is the second biggest in the alliance, and it is one of the few members that exceeds the spending target of 2 percent of GDP.

But the plain fact is that Turkey has become America's most dangerous ally.

Every day, headlines show it is a menace to the integrity of NATO. Its president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, is seeking to win what amounts to dictatorial power with a constitutional referendum next month, and, ironically, has taken to branding as "Nazis" other members of the alliance, the Germans and

Dutch, that have dared to challenge his ambition.

Erdogan's Turkey is specifically dangerous to the United States because, in order to stir up populist nationalist fervor and build his personal power, he has accused Washington of supporting a bloody coup plot that tried and failed to bring him down last July.

The ostensible reason for Erdogan's anti-American ire is that Fethullah

Gülen, the leader of an Islamist movement once allied with Erdogan's own Islamist AKP party and the supposed mastermind of the coup plot, lives in exile in the Pocono mountains of Pennsylvania.

But this is not just about rampant anti-American rhetoric. Among the tens of thousands of people jailed in Turkey are American citizens falsely accused of working for the CIA.

Immediately after the coup, which involved some Turkish air force officers, the Incirlik air base used by the United States in the war against the so-called Islamic State was cordoned off and effectively shut down for several days. Its Turkish commander was placed under arrest and frog-marched off the base.

Given the Turkish government's behavior and the country's evident instability, it's of no small concern that under NATO's "nuclear sharing" program, an estimated 50 to 90 atomic weapons reportedly are located at Incirlik (PDF). Although these B61 munitions are considered "tactical" weapons, each thermonuclear device has a potential blast yield of about 340 kilotons—more than 20 times that of the "Little Boy" bomb dropped on Hiroshima in 1945.

In the immediate aftermath of the Incirlik blockade and arrests last summer, spurious reports played up by Russian propagandists claimed the nukes had been moved from Incirlik to Romania. That was not the case. But there remains wide sentiment among security analysts that those nukes should be moved somewhere more secure.

As a Congressional Research Service report (PDF) noted at the time, concerns were based on "both the ongoing political uncertainties in Turkey, including the evolving state of U.S.-Turkish relations, and the base's proximity to territory controlled by ISIS."

The Syrian border is about a two-and-a-half-hour drive from Incirlik. Towns like Al Bab and Dabiq, until recently under the control of the so-called Islamic State, are slightly further.

The argument for leaving the nukes in Turkey was to reassure Ankara against a threat from Russia. But given the obvious and growing rapprochement between Erdogan and Russian President Vladimir Putin, and Erdogan's increasingly overt hostility toward his NATO allies, leaving thermonuclear weapons on the bomb racks of Incirlik seems to many a pointless and dangerous exercise.

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Graham Allison, author of *Nuclear Terrorism*, notes there is no official U.S. acknowledgment of this arsenal's location but says he believes the security of U.S. equipment at Incirlik is "generally very good." Any attempt by Turkey to seize the nuclear weapons would be considered an act of war, which

is very unlikely, he says. But still, their presence is troubling.

"The weapons should be moved," says Hans Kristensen of the Federation of Atomic Scientists. "With Erdogan's behavior, they no longer seem to serve a useful role of reassurance... It is the local and regional insecurity that demands a removal. Even though the [U.S.] Air Force will insist that they can protect the base, it is simply unacceptable to expose nuclear weapons to such a security situation. Nowhere else in the world does the U.S. store nuclear weapons under such conditions."

Given the current environment, nightmare scenarios are easy to imagine.

"I worry more about Erdogan, or anti-Erdogan elements in the military, than ISIS," says Jeffrey Lewis, a nuclear nonproliferation expert at the Middlebury Institute of International Studies in Monterey, California.

But here's the problem: As ISIS comes under increasing pressure in Iraq and Syria, it's looking for new bases from which to operate, and it's looking for vengeance against Turkey, which aided and abetted the jihadist buildup in Syria in the early part of this decade, then turned on it in 2016.

An article in the current issue of *Sentinel*, the journal published by West Point's Combating Terrorism Center (CTC), gives a sense of just how dangerous the Turkish security situation is becoming.

Its author, Ahmet Yayla, formerly was the deputy chief of the counterterrorism department of the Turkish National Police (the post he held when I first met him several years ago). And he subsequently served as the head of counterterrorism in the city of Sanliurfa, just north of the Syrian border, from 2012 to 2014. There he witnessed firsthand the contradictory policies of the Erdogan government that allowed some 25,000 foreign fighters to join the ranks of the so-called Islamic State.

As Yayla told me when we met recently in Washington, D.C., "If Erdogan had not let those foreign fighters go through Turkey to Syria, there would be no ISIS as we know it today."

Yayla is now in exile, teaching at George Mason University in northern Virginia, and he recently co-authored a book with Anne Speckhard, an expert on the psychology of extremists, *ISIS Defectors: Inside Stories of the Terrorist Caliphate*.

Predictably, because of his reporting on de facto cooperation between the Turkish government and ISIS fighters, Ankara has claimed Yayla is a Gülenist, an allegation he flatly denies. Since last July his 19-year-old son has been under arrest in Turkey in what appears to be an effort to intimidate him.

Yayla's article in CTC *Sentinel* centers on an attack by a lone ISIS gunman in the early hours of Jan. 1 this year that killed 39 people and wounded 71 in Istanbul's fashionable Reina Nightclub on the European edge of the Bosphorus.

But it's the context for that attack that is most worrisome. The killer, Abdulkadir Masharipov, was an ISIS "sleeper" originally from Uzbekistan who had lived quietly for a year in a provincial Turkish city with his wife and children before he received a message on Christmas Day directing him to carry out a massacre in Istanbul.

This was no "lone wolf." Reports in the Turkish press subsequently documented the extent of the support network that sheltered Masharipov and armed him after he got the order from his handler in Raqqa, the ISIS capital, to move ahead with the operation.

"Thus far, the investigations into the Reina attack have revealed that more than 50 individuals directly provided support to Masharipov before and after the attack," Yayla writes. "The investigations have also revealed just how cash rich the group is inside of Turkey. In total, just over \$500,000 was confiscated by authorities from the network linked to the attack, a clear indication of the priority given to international operations by Islamic State decision-makers."

American soldiers fighting in the counterinsurgencies like to say when they're about to attack an enemy stronghold, "We'll put our boot in the middle of the puddle and see which way the water squirts."

Yayla makes the case that as ISIS gets stomped in Syria and Iraq, it's not just squirting, its fighters are flooding toward Turkey, where they have had at least four years to build the organization's infrastructure.

He was an eyewitness to the huge flow of people coming from Syria into Turkey after 2012.

As the civil war in Syria escalated, he writes, Turkey's southern borders were overwhelmed with refugees fleeing from Syria—more than 3 million—who were let in regardless of their background.

"The influx of refugees was so overwhelming that it became a major security concern for border cities because of the opportunities it provided the Islamic State to infiltrate operatives into Turkey," according to Yayla. "Sanliurfa alone received more than 400,000 refugees in just 20 months."

By the time ISIS declared its "caliphate" in June 2014, it was essentially the main southern neighbor of Turkey. "In the months that followed, it strengthened its control of major border areas and thereby its ability to transport material and foreign fighter movements back and forth across the border."

"Ankara was prepared to tolerate a certain degree of Islamic State activity on its soil and on its border with Syria," says Yayla, "because it was seen as an enemy to the Assad regime and to Kurdish fighters linked to the PKK [insurgents inside Turkey] rather than a direct threat to Turkish national security... In 2014 and 2015, Turkey did not carry out a single pre-planned, intelligence-led counterterrorism operation on its soil against the Islamic State and other jihadi terrorist organizations. Even in 2016, when Turkey started treating the threat more seriously, counterterrorism operations were mostly launched in reaction to different terrorist incidents, and in most cases, suspects were released swiftly."

At the same time, according to Yayla's CTC *Sentinel* article, Turkish police and counterterror operations were being eviscerated by the Erdogan government. The dismissals began in December 2013 after sensational corruption charges were leveled against senior figures in Erdogan's party. Then, after the attempted coup last year, the purges took on monumental proportions. More than 125,000 government officials were fired, and more than 40,000 were arrested. Half the active-duty generals in the military were sacked.

"The Turkish National Police lost more than 20,000 officers in the period since late 2013, including police chiefs and officers who had spent years in the field fighting terrorism," according to Yayla's heavily footnoted article.

As a result, while the hardened fighters of ISIS are looking to make their move, many of the cops trying to stop them are rookies.

"The Islamic State will likely expand its campaign of attacks in Turkey," writes Yayla. In the Jan. 6 issue of the ISIS magazine *Rumiyah*, he notes, the group declared that Turkey's "NATO membership, secular governance, security

operations against Islamic State operatives on Turkish soil, support for the Shi'a-dominated government in Baghdad, and incursion into Islamic State territory in Syria meant war."

A few weeks earlier ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, infuriated by Turkish incursions into the territories near the border that the group was accustomed to control, called on his followers to attack Turkey, "destroy its security, and sow horror within it. Put it on your list of battlefields.

Turkey entered the war with the Islamic States with cover and protection from Crusader jets." And many of those, one might note, flew out of Incirlik.

At the end of the day, as the Turkish government now tries to confront

this threat, whatever its grievous miscalculations of the past, one must wish it well. But one must also wish that the United States would get its nukes out of there.

**The
New York
Times**

Warnings of a 'Powder Keg' in Libya as ISIS Regroups

Eric Schmitt

Libya remains a violent and divided nation rife with independent militias, flooded with arms and lacking legitimate governance and political unity. Tripoli, the capital, is controlled by a patchwork of armed groups that have built local fiefs and vied for power since Libya's 2011 uprising. Running gun battles have seized Tripoli in recent days.

"Libya is descending into chaos," said Brig. Gen. Zakaria Ngobongue, a senior Chadian officer who directed a major counterterrorism exercise here in the Chadian capital last week involving 2,000 African and Western troops and trainers. "It's a powder keg."

Libya's neighbors have rushed to ward off the threat of Islamic fighters seeking safe haven within their borders or trying to recruit their young people to fill its depleted ranks.

Tunisia, which has suffered several devastating terrorist attacks in recent years, has already built a 125-mile earthen wall, which stretches about half the length of its border with Libya, in an attempt to prevent militants from infiltrating.

Since last summer, the United States has been flying unarmed surveillance drone missions over Libya from bases in Tunisia, a significant expansion of that country's counterterrorism cooperation with the Pentagon.

Algeria announced this month that it had opened a

new air base in the country's far south to help secure its borders with Mali, Niger and Libya.

And Chad closed its borders with Libya in January, fearing potential terrorist infiltration. The country reopened one main border crossing this month under pressure from border towns suffering a dearth of commercial traffic and to allow Chadian citizens to return home from Libya.

"As long as the Libyan chaos lasts, security in the Sahel and the Sahara will always be strained," President Idriss Déby of Chad told a regional security conference in Bamako, Mali, this month. The Sahel is a vast area on the southern flank of the Sahara that stretches from Senegal east to Chad.

American intelligence agencies offered wide-ranging estimates last year on the peak number of Islamic State fighters in Libya — mainly in Surt, but also in Benghazi and Tripoli — with some assessments topping 5,000 militants.

Perhaps several hundred of those fighters have survived and fled in various directions within the country, or even to Europe, military officials and intelligence analysts say.

"The multiple militias and fractured relationship between factions in east and west Libya exacerbate the security situation, spilling into Tunisia and Egypt and the broader Maghreb, allowing the movement of foreign fighters, enabling the flow of migrants out of Libya to Europe and

elsewhere," General Waldhauser said.

Even before President Trump took office, vowing to intensify the global fight against ISIS, the Pentagon was accelerating its counterterrorism efforts here in Central Africa.

The United States is building a \$50 million drone base in Agadez, Niger. When completed next year, it will allow Reaper surveillance drones to fly from hundreds of miles closer to southern Libya, to monitor Islamic State insurgents flowing south and other extremists flowing north from the Sahel region.

American Special Operations forces and the C.I.A. have been working for more than a year to identify militia fighters in Libya who the United States can trust and support as a ground force to combat ISIS fighters, as the Pentagon did last year with militias from Misrata.

"We must carefully choose where and with whom we work with to counter ISIS-Libya in order not to shift the balance between factions and risk sparking greater conflict in Libya," General Waldhauser said.

In the meantime, American spy agencies, as well as Western and African intelligence operatives, are monitoring the movements of ISIS fighters, who officials say have been wary of gathering in large groups since the January strike by B-52s and armed Reaper drones flying from Sicily. American commanders say they could conduct more strikes if insurgents mass in large enough groups.

"We will be able to keep pressure on that ISIS network enough to keep it decentralized so that it cannot mass and to buy time for the G.N.A. to develop governance," said Brig. Gen. Donald C. Bolduc, who oversees American Special Operations forces in Africa, using an acronym for the new Libyan unity government.

General Bolduc acknowledged in an interview, however, "None of this is going to happen fast." He noted that the Islamic State in Libya is "looking to work gaps and seams, and doing it all over again to gain a foothold, influencing the populace."

It is an assessment shared by independent Libya specialists.

"ISIS in Libya is down but not out, and in the meantime, all of Libya's other problems remain, which ensures that ISIS or something a lot like it will have little problem reasserting itself when the time is right," said Michael R. Shurkin, a senior political scientist at RAND and a former C.I.A. analyst. "Be wary of any U.S. policy that amounts to calling it a victory and walking away."

Correction: March 22, 2017

An earlier version of this article incorrectly described the aircraft that carried out strikes against an Islamic State training camp in January. They were B-2 bombers, not B-52 bombers.

**The
Washington
Post**

Tillerson visit to Moscow appears to be a stand-in for a Trump-Putin meeting

<https://www.facebook.com/anne.gearan>

The State Department would give no details Tuesday about a planned trip by Secretary of State Rex Tillerson to Moscow next month, but the visit appears to be a stand-in for any immediate meeting between President Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Tillerson, who drew skepticism from Democrats and some Republicans for his ties to Russia and Putin when he headed the oil giant ExxonMobil,

will be the first high-level Trump administration emissary to go to Moscow.

The trip could provide insight into how the Trump administration will approach Russia, even as the FBI says it is investigating the Kremlin's intervention in the 2016 election and possible coordination between the Trump campaign and officials in Moscow.

A U.S. official who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss Tillerson's upcoming travel had said

Monday that Tillerson would make the trip in mid-April. The same official confirmed that Tillerson would skip a meeting among foreign ministers of NATO member countries the previous week in Italy. Tillerson is expected to attend Trump's meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping in Florida instead.

On Tuesday, U.S. officials said there might be an attempt to reschedule the NATO meeting so Tillerson can attend.

Although Tillerson has already met with his Russian counterpart, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, on the sidelines of a diplomatic meeting in Germany, doing so on Russian soil sends a different message in both countries. Many meetings among U.S. and Russian diplomats have taken place in third countries to avoid the appearance that one side is bowing to the other.

State Department spokesman Mark Toner declined to discuss the trip Tuesday. A White House

spokesman did not respond to questions about the timing and agenda for the trip or the political thinking behind it.

The Kremlin said in February that a one-on-one meeting between Trump and Putin might be possible before the two attend the Group of 20 summit meeting in Germany in July. That will be the first time they are scheduled to be in the same place at the same time.

Slovenia, where first lady Melania Trump was born, has offered to host a separate meeting between the two leaders.

Putin said in February that Russia was waiting for the United States to

decide how to approach any meetings.

Both Trump and Putin have said that they want to try to improve relations that sank to a new diplomatic low during the Obama administration. Until recent weeks, U.S.-Russia ties had appeared to be on the mend, with Putin welcoming Trump's election and inauguration and Trump calling the Russian leader "very smart."

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The honeymoon now appears over, following the U.S. intelligence community's conclusion that Russia attempted to influence the outcome of the presidential election in Trump's favor. The Kremlin's actions and any contacts it might have had with Trump campaign officials are separately being investigated by Congress and the FBI.

[Full transcript: FBI director Comey testifies on Russian interference in the election]

Trump campaign adviser Michael Flynn, an advocate for improved relations with Moscow, was forced to resign as White House national security adviser over the nature of

his conversations with Russia's ambassador to the United States.

Russia denies involvement in the hacking of the Democratic National Committee and leading Democrats, as well as providing that politically damaging material to the anti-secrecy group WikiLeaks during the campaign.

Putin had hoped that the Trump administration would quickly lift U.S. financial sanctions levied over Russia's annexation of the Ukrainian region of Crimea, but Tillerson and other U.S. officials have poured cold water on that.

Bloomberg

Bershidsky : Belarus Is the Latest Thorn in Putin's Side

Leonid Bershidsky

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko is caught in the crossfire of a much larger battle. He'd like closer ties with the European Union and weaker ones with Russia, but the drift appears to be drawing popular protests driven by growing dissatisfaction with his repressive policies and failed management of the economy.

QuickTake Vladimir Putin

Lukashenko, whom Condoleezza Rice once shortsightedly called Europe's last dictator, has always had more trouble than, say, Ukrainian leaders in trying to play Russia and Europe against each other. His regime was dependent on Russia for cheap natural gas and other indirect subsidies, goodies came at the cost of hewing close to the Kremlin's course.

But Lukashenko was mostly fine with the arrangement, sharing Russian President Vladimir Putin's autocratic instincts and tendency to see political opposition as enemies to be suppressed. He also knew Belarus's state-dominated economic model wouldn't survive broader exposure to Europe.

Then Russia annexed Crimea in March, 2014, which sparked sanctions from the EU and the U.S. Lukashenko refused to back Putin's move, fearing his small country

would be next in line. When Moscow tried to punish the EU with counter-sanctions, Belarus was hardly in lockstep, happily serving as a fake country of origin for many European products. Last year, Belarus failed to agree with Russia on the price of gas and paid only half what the Russian state supplier, Gazprom, demanded, accumulating more than \$500 million in debt -- about six weeks' economic output.

In January, Lukashenko signed a decree allowing the citizens of 80 countries, including Europeans and U.S. citizens, to enter Belarus without visas for five days. This was an attempt to raise tourist revenue in a shrinking economy. But the Kremlin responded by putting out a terse statement and setting up border checkpoints.

Anti-Kremlin European politicians, for their part, noticed with approval that Lukashenko appeared to be in a liberalizing mood. "Visa no longer needed to visit Belarus," former Swedish Prime Minister Carl Bildt tweeted last week. "As fascinating as unknown. And obviously much to see."

There is, however, a flip side to liberalization. Last week, thousands of people -- large numbers for notoriously passive Belarus -- took to the streets throughout the country to protest against a Lukashenko decree that imposed a tax on people who hadn't worked for six months or

more -- a Soviet-inspired revenue-boosting measure.

The regime has a history of violently suppressing protest, but this year sweeping violence was out of the question because it would disgust potential European partners. Lukashenko had the protest leaders briefly detained and suspended the offending decree. It's not clear whether this will have a dampening effect on further protests, scheduled for the coming weekend. Some opposition leaders are hopeful that the regime is beginning to stumble.

"We are witnessing a systemic crisis," one of them, Nikolai Statkevich, a retired colonel and former political prisoner, told the anti-Lukashenko website Belorussian Partisan. "Russia used to pay for all the fun, but now it cannot keep paying more, and more is constantly needed because the efficiency of this kind of economy is falling. Russia demands more and more in exchange, and giving it up is already dangerous for Lukashenko's personal power."

Lukashenko is increasingly paranoid. On Tuesday, he announced that his security forces had detained "several dozen" armed militants who had gotten into Belarus from their training camps in Ukraine and perhaps Poland and Lithuania. The fighters, he claimed, had been trained and funded by his

opponents who had fled the country for Eastern Europe.

The accusations against Eastern European states could be the beginning of another pendulum swing away from Europe and toward Russia. Losing a known quantity like Lukashenko would be a disaster for the Kremlin, especially if he's replaced by a pro-European leader. But Russian money cannot keep putting out Lukashenko's fires indefinitely; the tactic failed Putin in Ukraine in 2014.

There is an old Russian joke about an experiment: a Russian, a Ukrainian and a Belarussian are told to sit on a chair that has a long sharp nail sticking out of it. The Russian sits down, jumps up cursing, kicks over the chair, hits the experimenter in the face. The Ukrainian leaps up, looks down at the chair, pulls out the nail and puts it in his pocket -- it could come in handy. The Belarussian stays put. "Doesn't it hurt?" the experimenter asks him. "I thought that was the whole point," the Belarussian answers. But even this legendary patience will eventually run out. Further developments in Belarus are worth watching to see what lessons Putin has drawn from Ukraine, and whether popular discontent can thwart him again.

Bloomberg

Sharma : Is Modi Too Powerful for His Own Good?

Mihir Sharma

India has never been a perfect democracy. But for decades it's succeeded in being a representative one. Its politics are raucous, with dozens of parties and unwieldy ruling coalitions. This has long been a source of dismay to its influential middle class, who speak longingly

of the "efficiency" they imagine one-party rule has delivered to countries as big as China and as tiny as Singapore.

QuickTake India's Aspirations

Those Indians should beware what they wish for. Politically, if not constitutionally, India is edging ever closer to being a one-party state --

closer than it's been since the heyday of the Indian National Congress Party, which led the country to independence. In 2014, under Narendra Modi, the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party won an absolute majority of seats in parliament on its own, something that hadn't happened in three decades. The party has since

extended its dominance, sweeping to power in several more states this month including India's most populous, Uttar Pradesh.

The opposition is in complete disarray. Congress appears to be in terminal decline. The party has no idea what it stands for, and the only thing holding it together is the

increasingly unpopular Nehru-Gandhi dynasty. A much younger challenger, the Aam Aadmi Party, has been built up for years by the Delhi-based "national" media, but has struggled to expand outside the capital. And strong regional leaders can hold Modi at bay for only so long; he trounced two of them in Uttar Pradesh.

Modi has chosen to wield his mandate defiantly, ignoring those who argued that Uttar Pradesh voters were responding to his promises of jobs and economic development, and appointing an inexperienced priest-politician named Adityanath to run the state. "Yogi," as he is known, is hardly the most inspiring of figures; Foreign Policy magazine declared in 2008 he was one of "the world's worst religious leaders." His speeches have consistently demonized Muslims; he's even called for Hindu icons to be installed in every mosque in India. His views on women's issues are equally clear and dispiriting: Their "energy" must be "channelled and regulated" so they can give birth to great men.

Uttar Pradesh is vast. Were it a separate country, it would be the world's fourth-largest democracy. Its population is young, growing and jobless. Yet Gorakhpur, the northeastern city which Adityanath has represented for five terms in Parliament, is far from a model of development; it's in fact one of the most depressing places I have ever visited. Industry and investment have passed it by. People talk in hushed tones of the power of the temple that Adityanath heads, and of the dreaded militia through which he rules the area.

Some observers think Modi is showing his real colors. Faced with a discredited and ineffectual opposition, the BJP can now become more truly itself. Perhaps that's why not one of the 400-plus BJP candidates in Uttar Pradesh was a Muslim -- although Muslims make up one-fifth of the state's population. The political scientist Pratap Bhanu Mehta, writing in the Indian Express newspaper, argues that after its victory, "the BJP believes it can get away with anything."

Another possibility, though, is that Modi is being carried along by the forces he's unleashed. Indeed, some Uttar Pradesh voters would probably argue that he and the BJP haven't been energetic enough on the social issues that Adityanath has made his own -- such as "love jihad," a ludicrous conspiracy theory which suggests Muslim boys are being trained in madrassas how to wear flashy clothes and ride off with Hindu girls on their motorcycles, thereby increasing the numbers of Muslims and coincidentally depriving deserving young Hindu men of mates. Adityanath might not have been Modi's first choice -- he prefers less charismatic state leaders -- but, given the strength of such sentiments, the Prime Minister might have felt he had no other choice.

It's worth remembering that Modi's rise has shifted the political spectrum in India. Once, not so long ago, he represented the far right; today, he's the center. Compared to Adityanath, certainly, Modi looks like a moderate.

That's why the BJP's extraordinary dominance of the political space is not without its dangers -- even for Modi. Years ago, the BJP Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, after anti-Muslim riots in Gujarat, gently chided the fiery radical in charge of the state at the time, reminding him of his "rajdharm" -- his duty as a leader. But that radical chief minister proved too popular for the centrist prime minister to remove. And today, Modi sits where Vajpayee did.

The BJP has never concealed its desire to crush its political opponents; one of its most popular slogans promises a "Congress-free India." (Imagine the Democrats promising a "Republican-free America.") But, whether Modi likes it or not, India is not China, or even Singapore. It is a real democracy, and democracies abhor vacuums. If the opposition to Modi doesn't come from outside, and from the left, it will come from inside, and to his right.

**The
Washington
Post**

Editorial : Rex Tillerson Has Shown No Illusions About North Korea

One thing that came through loud and clear in Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's recent trip to Asia is that he is under no illusions about the urgency of the North Korean nuclear and missile threat.

But his references to North Korea as an "imminent threat" that requires "immediate attention" did not provide a clear picture of how he intends to proceed and in what way the Trump administration's approach would differ from President Barack Obama's policy of strategic patience -- waiting out the North Koreans while ratcheting up sanctions and covert action.

That policy failed to constrain a program that has produced enough fissile material for about 21 nuclear bombs and enabled Pyongyang to accelerate the development of missiles that could carry warheads to hit Japan, South Korea and, one day, the United States -- and that has people like China's foreign minister, Wang Yi, warning of a "head-on collision" between North Korea and the United States.

Mr. Tillerson seemed to rule out negotiations with the North and suggested that the United States might be forced to take pre-emptive military action if the North Koreans "elevate the threat of their weapons program" to an unacceptable level. This sort of talk is jarring and risky, and even though negotiations are a long shot, there is little hope of moderating the North's position without them.

En route from Seoul to Beijing, he told a reporter from the conservative-leaning website Independent Journal Review that while "all options are on the table," there are "a lot of steps and a lot of distance between now and a time that we would have to make a decision like that." He talked of a multistep process in which countries, especially China, would be encouraged to carry out United Nations Security Council sanctions intended to press the North to give up its nuclear program, and he said that even tougher sanctions -- ideas under discussion include barring North Korea from the global financial system and penalizing Chinese banks that do business

with North Korea -- could be considered.

The objective, he said, was not "to force them into some brash action. It's our objective for them to understand things only continue to get more difficult if they don't change their path. We want to give you time to change your path." And while the Trump approach seems inclined toward a harder line, there have been positive gestures: President Trump did not block an Obama administration decision to donate humanitarian aid to Unicef for North Korea, and he let visas be issued for North Korean officials to meet with some experts in the United States, until the North's assassination of its leader Kim Jong-un's half brother in Malaysia made it necessary to cancel the meeting.

Like Mr. Obama, Mr. Trump sees China as the only country with the leverage to get the North to abandon its nuclear program. But the agenda with China also includes trade and other issues and the preservation of a vital relationship that Mr. Trump needs to get right. After Mr. Trump's frequent harsh

complaints about China, it was stunning to hear Mr. Tillerson, in Beijing, adopt language that Chinese leaders use to describe their vision for a United States-China relationship built on "nonconfrontation, no conflict, mutual respect and always searching for win-win solutions."

American experts say China is likely to view this formulation as American acceptance of its sphere of influence in Tibet, Xinjiang, Taiwan and the South China Sea while Mr. Trump may see it as the cost of getting Beijing to lean harder on North Korea. If the United States and China can find a path forward on North Korea, the time to announce it is when Mr. Trump and President Xi Jinping hold their first meeting, reportedly in April.

The situation with North Korea is steadily deteriorating. After Mr. Tillerson's muscular comments on the Asia trip, North Korea declared that it was ready for war with the United States and fears neither possible pre-emptive military action nor harsher sanctions.

**The
New York
Times**

Becoming Duterte: The Making of a Philippine Strongman (UNE)

Richard C. Paddock
DAVAO CITY, Philippines — President Rodrigo Duterte relishes the image of killer-savior. He boasts

of killing criminals with his own hand. On occasion, he calls for mass murder.

Speaking of the drug addicts he says are destroying the Philippines,

he said, "I would be happy to slaughter them."

Mr. Duterte and his friends have long cultivated legends of his sadistic exploits, like throwing a

drug lord from a helicopter and forcing a tourist who violated a smoking ban to eat his cigarette butt at gunpoint.

It is a thuggish image that Mr. Duterte embraces.

Whether Mr. Duterte has done what he says — the killings he claims to have carried out are impossible to verify — he has realized his gory vision in national policy. First as a mayor, now as president of the Philippines, he has encouraged the police and vigilantes to kill thousands of people with impunity.

While his draconian justice and coarse manner have earned him widespread condemnation outside the Philippines, an in-depth look at his rise to power and interviews with many people close to him reveal a man of multiple contradictions.

He has alienated many with outrageous comments and irrational behavior, yet remains wildly popular. He is an antidrug crusader, yet has struggled with drug abuse himself. And he grew up a child of privilege, the son of a provincial governor, yet was subjected to regular beatings.

His mother whipped him so often for his misbehavior that she wore out her horsewhip, according to his brother, Emmanuel Duterte. At parochial school, he was caned by Jesuit priests and, the president says, molested by one. By his teenage years, he was known as a street brawler.

"Violence in the house, violence in the school and violence in the neighborhood," Emmanuel Duterte said. "That is why he is always angry. Because if you have pain when you are young, you are angry all the time."

Years later, a psychological assessment of Mr. Duterte, prepared in 1998 for the annulment of his marriage, concluded that he had "narcissistic personality disorder" and a "pervasive tendency to demean, humiliate others and violate their rights."

Nonetheless, his ailing ex-wife campaigned for his presidential bid last year.

That act of devotion only begins to unravel the paradox that is Mr. Duterte. Behind his brutish caricature, according to interviews with dozens of Mr. Duterte's friends, family members, allies and critics, is a man who can be charming and engaging. He has many loyal friends and a soft spot for sick children.

As mayor of Davao City, he was known to help people in need by digging into his pocket and handing them a wad of cash. To many, his vulgar jokes only burnish his bona fides as a man of the people. When he appears in public, he is swarmed by adoring fans.

Still, the bodies have been piling up. Since Mr. Duterte took office last June and declared a "war" on drugs, the police and unknown assassins have killed more than 3,600 people, the police say, mostly in the slums of Philippine cities. Some put the toll at more than 7,000.

"I might go down in the history as the butcher," he acknowledged unapologetically in January.

In less than nine months, he has already surpassed the death toll of President Ferdinand Marcos, whose forces killed about 3,300 political opponents and activists during his harsh 20-year rule.

Yet his gangland approach to combating crime and drugs has largely endeared him to Filipinos who have suffered high rates of violent crime and who see him as a refreshing change from the sophisticated but out-of-touch elite who have ruled this country for most of the last three decades.

The dissonance between the image of the gentle, caring grandfather and the brutal strongman spilling blood on the streets is just one of many in a common-man president who was born to the elite and has lived a life surrounded by violence.

Young, Armed and Angry

Rodrigo Roa Duterte grew up in war-torn Davao City, in the southern Philippines, the oldest son of the governor of Davao Province.

As a teenager, he hung out with the toughest kids, got into fights and learned the rude expressions he uses today. By 15, he was carrying a gun, his brother said.

As a freshman at the Ateneo de Davao high school, he was fondled by an American priest, an experience he revealed only in 2015. He identified the priest as the Rev. Mark Falvey, who later moved to California and died in 1975. The Jesuit order agreed in 2007 to pay \$16 million to nine people Father Falvey molested as children at a Hollywood church.

Mr. Duterte retaliated against another priest who had punished him by filling a squirt gun with ink and spraying the priest's white cassock, his siblings said. For that, he was expelled. He often skipped classes and likes to tell audiences that it took him seven years to finish high school.

His misbehavior was often overlooked because of his status, family members say. "He was known as the governor's son," said his older sister, Eleanor Duterte.

A daredevil, he took flying lessons at 16. On his first solo flight, he buzzed the family home and hit a

tree-top with the wheel of his Piper Cub, Emmanuel Duterte said. Later, a car accident put him in a coma for two days, his sister Jocelyn Duterte said.

The first time he killed a man, he says, was in a drunken beach brawl at age 17. "Maybe I stabbed somebody to death," he told an interviewer two years ago.

His reputation as a womanizer is well founded, but it was often women who sought him out. "Being the governor's son," Jocelyn Duterte said, "the women were always available."

His father told him that since he was always in trouble, he could save legal fees by becoming a lawyer, his brother recalled, so Rodrigo went to law school. In his final year, he shot and wounded a fellow student whom he accused of bullying him.

Mr. Duterte graduated anyway and became a prosecutor.

"One thing about my brother is he is hardheaded," Emmanuel Duterte said. "The more you tell him not to do it, the more he will do it. He needs to tone down on his anger. He needs anger management."

In the 1980s, his mother led frequent marches against President Marcos's dictatorial rule. After his ouster, President Corazon Aquino offered her the post of Davao's vice mayor. She asked that Rodrigo be appointed instead, friends and family said.

Two years later, in 1988, he ran for mayor and won, starting a lifelong streak in which he has never lost an election.

When he took office, much of Davao was a war zone. The iron rule of the Marcos era had ended, and Communist rebels held a large part of the city. Armed groups operated with impunity and assassinations of police officers were common.

Making the city safe was Mr. Duterte's biggest challenge, and one he accepted personally.

Jesus G. Dureza, a high school friend who is now a cabinet-level adviser, recalls seeing him late one night in the taxi he often drove to patrol the city. Mr. Duterte said he was hunting for a man who had been robbing cabdrivers. Mr. Dureza noticed that his pistol was cocked.

"He had a death wish," Mr. Dureza said.

The Davao Death Squad

Shortly after he became mayor, crime suspects started turning up dead on Davao's streets.

Mr. Duterte and his supporters have long denied the existence of a death squad in Davao City. But in September, Edgar Matobato, 57, came forward and told a Senate committee that he worked as an assassin on the squad for 24 years, killing about 50 people.

In an interview with The New York Times, he said the death squad was founded in 1988 at a lunch he attended at the old Menseng Hotel with Mr. Duterte, several police officers and six other recruits. They were told their job was to hunt down criminals.

A police officer passed around a covered basket, and each recruit took out a weapon. Mr. Matobato considered it good fortune that he drew a .45.

"The only one who could command the Davao Death Squad was Mayor Duterte," he told The Times. "If there was an order to kill, it had to be with his clearance. Without his orders, we kill no one."

Killer Says Duterte 'Is Really Sadistic'

Edgar Matobato, who says he was an assassin on the Davao Death Squad for 24 years, contends its orders came from Rodrigo Duterte, then the mayor of Davao.

March 21, 2017. Photo by Jes Aznar for The New York Times. Watch in Times Video »

Mr. Duterte took part in at least one killing, Mr. Matobato said. In 2007, a chance encounter on the road with a man named Vicente Amisola led to a shootout.

After Mr. Amisola ran out of ammunition, Mr. Matobato said, Mr. Duterte arrived, grabbed an Uzi and emptied two magazines at the defenseless Mr. Amisola.

When they checked Mr. Amisola's body, the squad discovered that he worked for the National Bureau of Investigation.

Arnold Rosales, the bureau's acting regional director in Davao, said that Mr. Matobato's account of Mr. Amisola's killing matched the findings of the bureau's investigation except for one detail: the allegation of Mr. Duterte's involvement.

Investigators concluded that the death was a result of miscommunication, and no charges were filed, Mr. Rosales said. The investigative report is missing, he said.

In February, a former police officer, Arthur Lascañas, 56, came forward and confessed to having led the death squad. He said that he received orders to kill directly from

Mr. Duterte and that he had killed 200 people.

"All the killings that we committed in Davao City, whether they were buried or thrown in the sea, were paid for by Mayor Duterte," he said.

Of the more than 1,400 people the Davao Death Squad is believed to have killed, at least one was not a crime suspect. Jun Pala, a journalist and outspoken critic of Mr. Duterte's, was gunned down near his home in 2003. Mr. Lascañas said the mayor ordered the killing, and that Mr. Lascañas helped carry it out.

Mr. Duterte has never directly addressed the accusations made by Mr. Matobato or Mr. Lascañas, and he declined to be interviewed for this article. After Mr. Matobato's testimony, Mr. Duterte accused the senator who led the committee of taking payoffs from drug lords. She was arrested and jailed last month.

Mr. Duterte's personal death toll is harder to substantiate. If he stabbed someone on the beach, there is no record of it. In boasting that he hunted down suspects by night, he offered no specifics.

His claim to have killed "about three people" probably refers to a 1988 hostage raid in which he says he fired an M-16 at three kidnapers. But he recently acknowledged, "I may have hit them all or none at all."

'A Simple Man'

Becoming president has been an adjustment for Mr. Duterte, who is 71. For months, he still thought of himself as mayor and often called himself that.

He prefers to go home to Davao City rather than stay in the sprawling presidential palace complex in Manila. In a land that is notoriously corrupt and where government officials often live like kings, he has lived for decades in the same modest two-story house where he only recently installed air-conditioning.

Pomilda Daniel, a neighbor, calls him "a simple man." She said that Mr. Duterte once admired her large new television and asked if he could have it if it ever

broke so that he could fix it and use it.

Yet when he discovered during a visit to the House of Hope, a child cancer treatment center in Davao, that the children had no televisions, he returned the same day with nine TV sets and had them installed, said Dr. Mae Dolendo, a pediatric oncologist who heads the center.

"He is very, very compassionate," she said. "We have had presidents who conducted themselves like we would expect presidents to conduct themselves, but they haven't solved the country's problems. He's not perfect. He curses. But he gets things done."

Mr. Duterte has no official first lady and boasted during his campaign that he had two wives and two girlfriends. Later, he said that he should give Pfizer an award for creating Viagra.

In 1973, he eloped with Elizabeth Zimmerman, a former flight attendant, after courting her for a month. The marriage lasted until 2000, when it was annulled.

The psychological assessment of Mr. Duterte prepared for the annulment, a copy of which was obtained by The Times, was based on an examination of Ms. Duterte and is not a diagnosis.

In addition to the finding of narcissism, it described Mr. Duterte as a "control freak" and womanizer who began having affairs soon after he was married and flaunted his infidelity by bringing girlfriends to public functions.

While still married, Mr. Duterte met Cielito Avanceña, a teenage contestant in a beauty pageant who goes by Honeylet. She is 25 years his junior. He has described her as his second wife, although they never married.

Ms. Duterte and Ms. Avanceña declined to be interviewed.

Duterte's Other Drug Problem

Perhaps some of the president's mercurial behavior stems from the constant pain he suffers and his use of narcotics to treat it. Mr. Duterte has made a political career of fighting drugs but acknowledged in

December that he had been abusing the opioid fentanyl, the powerful and addictive drug that killed the musician Prince last April.

Mr. Duterte began using fentanyl to treat back pain and migraines from a spinal injury, apparently a result of a motorcycle accident a few years ago.

His doctor prescribed a quarter of a fentanyl skin patch, the president said, but he began using an entire patch at a time. When his doctor discovered that, he ordered him to quit.

"He said: 'Stop it. The first thing that you would lose is your cognitive ability,'" the president recounted. "You are, you know, abusing the drug."

Mr. Duterte has not said publicly when he started using fentanyl or whether he has stopped. In December, he denied being addicted.

His communications director, Martin Andanar, said that Mr. Duterte had stopped using fentanyl "way before he was elected president" last May. But a person with knowledge of his condition told The Times in September that Mr. Duterte was using the drug then.

Mr. Duterte's energy and jet-black hair belie his age, but his afflictions have taken their toll. During public appearances, he often presses his fingers against a nerve on the side of his face to reduce the pain. He has skipped several public events because of illness.

In his speeches, he sometimes suggests he will not live to serve out his six-year term. He has not explained why.

Decades ago, Mr. Duterte learned that he had two rare conditions, Barrett's esophagus and Buerger's disease, which prompted him to quit drinking and smoking. As mayor, he enforced a strict public smoking ban, and he is now considering a similar measure nationwide.

He dislikes being questioned about his health. After a reporter asked for his medical report, he publicly rebuked the journalist, demanding, "How is your wife's vagina?"

Loose Talk

Mr. Duterte's outrageous remarks have left many with the impression that he is unhinged.

He says God speaks to him and made him president of this heavily Roman Catholic country. He has compared himself to Hitler. He used a term that translates as "son of a whore" to describe both Pope Francis and President Barack Obama.

Antonio Trillanes, a senator, recalled that when they met in 2015 to discuss a political alliance, Mr. Duterte only wanted to talk about people he had killed and "how the brains were splattered all over the place, gangland style."

He seems never to have questioned the proposition that shooting people on the street is the best remedy for crime and addiction.

"I have my own political philosophy," he said recently. "Do not destroy my country, because I will kill you."

He scoffs at complaints about lack of due process for people killed by his police force and has threatened to kill human rights activists.

On numerous occasions, his aides have had to walk back his comments. Press secretary Ernesto Abella cautioned journalists that they should use their "creative imagination" to understand him and not be "too literal."

That Mr. Duterte's violent boasts should not always be taken literally matters little to his zealous supporters and is of little consolation to the families of the thousands killed by his policies.

"He is a child of privilege, but he became a champion of the little guy," said Ken Angeles, Mr. Duterte's college roommate and lifelong friend. "He's a very passionate guy."

Senator Trillanes, now a leading critic of Mr. Duterte, has another name for him: "mass murderer."

The Washington Post Secretary of state, NATO look for alternative date for first meeting

By Karen DeYoung

make the scheduled April 5 gathering in Brussels.

regularly denigrated NATO, meant no disrespect.

The State Department and NATO said Tuesday that they were seeking an alternative date for Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's first meeting with alliance foreign ministers, after he said he couldn't

But with little chance that ministers from 27 other member countries can change their schedules in the next two weeks to accommodate him, all sides scrambled to insist that Tillerson, whose president has

"We will find a way to address this," NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said in an interview. "The main thing is I'm absolutely confident about his absolute commitment to NATO."

"Absolutely," acting State Department spokesman Mark Toner said. "The United States remains 100 percent committed to NATO." Past secretaries had also missed the twice-yearly meeting on occasion, he told reporters, citing one absence in 1999 and another in 2003.

Tillerson, dinged by Democratic lawmakers and the media as increasingly irrelevant after he missed several White House meetings with visiting foreign leaders, reportedly doesn't want to miss President Trump's meeting next month with Chinese President Xi Jinping in Florida. The date hasn't yet been announced, but it is widely believed to be during the first week in April.

Questions raised about the NATO meeting were compounded by reports that Tillerson plans to travel to Moscow later next month. "If reporting is accurate, Donald Trump's administration is making a grave error that will shake the confidence of America's most important alliance and feed the concern that this administration [is] simply too cozy with [Russian President] Vladimir Putin," Rep. Eliot L. Engel (N.Y.), the ranking Democrat on the House Foreign Affairs Committee, said in a statement.

Tillerson met last month with many of his NATO counterparts at an economic meeting in Germany. Nearly all of them, along with Stoltenberg, are in Washington this week to attend a broader counterterrorism meeting that the

secretary is hosting. Vice President Pence and Defense Secretary Jim Mattis have visited alliance headquarters in Brussels.

But the extent of Trump's commitment has been a recurring NATO nightmare since his election campaign, when he famously called the alliance "obsolete," and said its best days were behind it. He would "certainly look at" getting rid of NATO, Trump said, since "it doesn't really help us" and "we're paying too much" for it.

More recently, Trump has tempered his remarks somewhat. At a news conference in Washington last week with German Chancellor Angela Merkel, he voiced "strong support for NATO," even though "many nations owe vast sums of money . . . and it is very unfair to the United States."

Stoltenberg moved early to bring Trump into the tent, during a call just days after the inauguration. With NATO's new \$1.2 billion Brussels headquarters scheduled to open later this year, he set the date for May 25 — when Trump was likely to be on his maiden presidential trip to Europe for a summit of the Group of Seven major industrialized nations — and invited

Trump to attend along with other alliance leaders.

The building includes an "Article 5 Memorial" — a piece of the fallen World Trade Center towers, commemorating the only time NATO has invoked the mutual defense provision in its charter — and a Cold War memorial centered on a chunk of the Berlin Wall.

"It was clear we wanted very much a meeting with the new president," Stoltenberg said, "to send an important message about transatlantic unity and about U.S. commitment to Europe."

No one expects Trump to stop dunning NATO for more money, although his charge that many owe "vast sums" is misplaced. As Merkel's government tersely pointed out following the news conference, member nations contribute capabilities, not cash, to their joint defense.

Checkpoint newsletter

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But the United States has for years pointed out that few members contribute their fair share. In 2014, all agreed they would bring their defense spending up to 2 percent of their gross domestic product within the next 10 years, a target that only five of 28 had met.

In the past two years, NATO has devoted more resources to counterterrorism, expanded a rapid-reaction force and, to meet a Russian buildup, is stationing 4,000 troops to its Baltic members. Decreases in defense budgets have stopped, and it increased overall last year by 3.8 percent.

"We've proven the last couple of years that NATO is able to adapt, to change," Stoltenberg said. Improvements "are not only words, but also deeds."

But he agrees with Trump that bigger defense budgets are a high priority, and he's not altogether unhappy with the president's continued focus on the issue.

As he travels to NATO capitals to meet with defense and finance ministers, Stoltenberg said, Trump's "strong message makes my work easier."

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Rex Tillerson, NATO Work to Reschedule Meeting

Julian E. Barnes in Brussels and Felicia Schwartz in Washington

Updated March 21, 2017 6:46 p.m. ET

U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, facing complaints over his unusual plan to skip a formal meeting of North Atlantic Treaty Organization foreign ministers in April, moved to reassure allies by suggesting alternative dates for the meeting, the State Department said.

Mr. Tillerson's travel schedule, which also revolves around a planned U.S. visit by Chinese President Xi Jinping and a trip to Russia, is raising questions at home and abroad as the Trump administration's intentions toward Moscow and NATO remain under scrutiny.

After complaints from diplomats, the State Department said on Tuesday it had offered dates to NATO that would allow Mr. Tillerson to attend the meeting of foreign ministers, which is currently planned for April 5-6.

"The United States remains 100% committed to NATO," spokesman Mark Toner said, adding that Mr. Tillerson would see most of his NATO colleagues at the State Department on Wednesday at a

meeting of the anti-Islamic State coalition. He also said acting Deputy Secretary of State Tom Shannon would attend the meeting in Mr. Tillerson's place.

"We're appreciative of the effort to accommodate Secretary Tillerson," Mr. Toner said. "We've offered alternative dates that the secretary could attend and those are now being considered."

A NATO official acknowledged the discussions over a new date. "We are in contact with the State Department on scheduling," the official said. "All decisions concerning the date of a ministerial are taken by consensus by all 28 allies."

While it isn't clear that the alliance can come to agreement on a new date, one senior NATO diplomat supported rescheduling the meeting until a time when Mr. Tillerson can attend.

Also Tuesday, a NATO spokeswoman said Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg would meet with President Donald Trump on April 12, ahead of the NATO leaders' summit on May 25, and the White House announced that the president would attend the summit. Mr. Stoltenberg met on Tuesday with Defense Secretary Jim Mattis, who said the U.S. and NATO have

a "very strong trans-Atlantic bond. It's getting stronger."

It would be unusual for a U.S. secretary of state to miss a formal NATO meeting. In the past 21 years, America's top diplomats have missed a gathering only twice. The last time was during the Iraq war in 2003, when Colin Powell canceled at the last moment.

Hillary Clinton, who was secretary of state from 2009-13, missed an informal meeting of NATO foreign ministers in June 2009 while recovering from a broken elbow.

Mr. Trump criticized the NATO alliance during his presidential campaign, describing it as "obsolete." Since taking office, he and his aides have been more supportive, but he has stepped up pressure on allies—most recently Germany—to spend more on defense.

Mr. Tillerson met Mr. Xi last weekend, and the Trump administration is planning for a visit by the Chinese leader to Mr. Trump's Mar-a-Lago resort in Florida on April 6-7, a U.S. official said.

The U.S. chief diplomat's current schedule, which includes a trip to a meeting of Group of Seven leading nations in Italy April 10-11 and a

visit to Russia, won't allow him to attend the NATO meeting on its current date, Mr. Toner said.

Mr. Tillerson appears likely to attend the meeting between Messrs. Trump and Xi if that visit takes place as is tentatively planned on April 6-7.

Mr. Tillerson has come under public scrutiny for not being present with Mr. Trump during high-profile meetings with foreign leaders, and attending the NATO meeting could mean he would miss all or part of the summit with Mr. Xi. Mr. Tillerson's first time participating in a meeting with Mr. Trump and a head of state was Monday, with Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi.

For the alliance, the appearance created by having America's top diplomat skip his first NATO gathering for meetings with officials from Russia and China would be worrisome. The decision to skip the NATO meeting also means Mr. Tillerson won't attend a separate meeting in Brussels on the Syria crisis.

Ivo Daalder, a former U.S. ambassador to NATO during the Obama administration, said the U.S. plays a key role at NATO ministerial meetings. There are five a year, three among defense ministers and two among foreign ministers.

"The U.S. is the key driver and the U.S. Secretary of State is the most important interlocutor," he said. "When the Secretary of State decides to skip the one meeting that is preparing a summit, he is sending the message that the U.S. thinks the NATO summit is not important."

However, Mr. Tillerson—in his seven weeks on the job—has shown little concern for appearances as he bucks

precedents set by previous secretaries. Many U.S. officials from the Obama and Bush administrations have derided meetings like the NATO ministerial as having secondary importance.

Current and former officials say there are more critical matters on the table with Russia and China. For instance, Mr. Tillerson has begun to press China on the threat of North Korea's nuclear-weapons

program. And Moscow and Washington have a host of issues to discuss, including the Syrian civil war.

Just before the NATO meeting, European officials planned to gather April 4-5 for a conference in Brussels on Syria. Officials had hoped Mr. Tillerson would attend, where European Union officials have invited foreign ministers.

Mr. Tillerson's counterpart at the Pentagon has tried to smooth relations with the NATO alliance. Mr. Mattis, the defense secretary, built his second overseas trip around a visit to NATO headquarters. While he delivered a tough message to NATO about military spending, Mr. Mattis won over diplomats with his praise for the alliance's work.

The New York Times

Coincidence or Message? A Timeline of Provocative Acts by North Korea

Rick Gladstone

North Korea is well known for provocative acts aimed at its most immediate adversaries — South Korea, the United States and Japan. But Kim Jong-un, the 33-year-old leader who took over in 2012 after his father died, also has sent increasingly blunt messages of defiance and even hostility to China, the North's ally, protector and provider, vexing the Chinese as well.

Based on their timing, the North Korean actions — whether they be a missile launch, nuclear test, execution or propaganda campaign — often seem like more than coincidence. Here is a sampling from the past decade:

A July 4 missile launch

As the United States celebrated Independence Day in 2006, North Korea test-fired seven ballistic missiles including the Taepo Dong 2, its longest-range missile, in what the State Department called a provocative act.

Shelling after a summit meeting

On Nov. 23, 2010, less than two weeks after South Korea hosted a Group of 20 summit meeting, North

Korea fired dozens of artillery shells onto a South Korean island, killing two soldiers and setting more than 60 houses on fire.

A nuclear test amid Lunar New Year celebrations

On Feb. 11, 2013, less than two weeks after the United Nations Security Council expanded sanctions on North Korea for a satellite launch, and in the midst of China's Lunar New Year holiday, North Korea confirmed it had conducted its third nuclear test.

An execution follows outreach to China

On Dec. 12, 2013, North Korea announced the execution of Jang Song-thaek, Mr. Kim's uncle and mentor, who was considered close to China and had actively sought advice from Chinese leaders on economic matters. Mr. Jang was accused of treason and corruption.

Midrange missiles are launched after three-way talks

On March 25, 2014, North Korea tested two midrange missiles, the first such launch in five years, hours after the United States, South Korea and Japan held an extraordinary

three-way summit meeting to discuss the North's nuclear buildup.

China snubs Kim, and good-will concerts are canceled

On Sept. 3, 2015, China held a grand celebration on the 70th anniversary of Japan's defeat in World War II, and Kim Jong-un was conspicuously not on the guest list, which included South Korea's president at the time, Park Geun-hye, whom Mr. Kim openly despised.

Two months later, concerts in China by an all-girl pop band from North Korea that had been intended to improve relations were abruptly canceled.

Nuclear tests bookend holidays and talks

On Feb. 6, 2016, as China prepared to celebrate the Lunar New Year, North Korea launched a long-range ballistic missile carrying what it described as an observation satellite, in defiance of United Nations sanctions.

On Sept. 8 of that year, less than a week after China hosted a Group of 20 summit meeting in Hangzhou, North Korea conducted its fifth and most powerful nuclear test.

A flurry of provocations after Trump settles in

North Korea tested an intermediate-range missile on Feb. 11, while President Trump was hosting Prime Minister Shinzo Abe of Japan at Mr. Trump's Mar-a-Lago club in Florida. The missile used solid fuel, which disarmament experts called a significant advance.

A few days later, Mr. Kim's estranged older half brother, Kim Jong-nam, who had been living in exile under China's protection, was assassinated at an airport in Malaysia. His death came amid rumors that China might have been preparing him to take over in case North Korea's government collapsed. North Korea denied responsibility.

On March 20, North Korea tested a revamped rocket engine, a few days after Secretary of State Rex W. Tillerson warned in South Korea that the Trump administration might take pre-emptive military action if the North Koreans elevated "the threat of their weapons program" to a level deemed unacceptable.

The Washington Post

Britain and U.S. ban most electronic devices in cabins on flights from several Muslim-majority countries (UNE)

<https://www.facebook.com/luz.lazo>. 14

LONDON — Britain joined the United States on Tuesday in barring passengers traveling from airports in several Muslim-majority countries from bringing laptops, tablets and other portable electronic devices on board with them when they fly.

The U.K. ban applies to six countries, while the U.S. ban covers 10 airports in eight Muslim-majority countries.

Fliers can still travel with these items, but they must be packed in

their checked baggage on U.S.- and U.K.-bound flights from airports across the countries, including busy hubs in Istanbul, Dubai and Doha, Qatar.

The British ban also includes some cellphones and is expected to apply to all airports in the six nations. The countries included in the British ban are Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, Tunisia and Saudi Arabia.

The U.S. restrictions were prompted by a growing concern within the government that terrorists who have long sought to develop hard-to-detect bombs hidden inside

electronic devices may have put renewed effort into that work, according to people familiar with the matter, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to talk about it. U.S. officials have been discussing whether to issue new security restrictions for some flights for the past two weeks, they said.

Officials have said that in 2014, U.S. authorities were increasingly worried that suspected bombmaker Ibrahim Hassan al-Asiri, who was allegedly instrumental to al-Qaeda's Yemen branch in several bomb plots, might be helping terrorists in

Syria develop new, harder-to-detect explosive devices.

[Al-Qaeda bombmaker Ibrahim Hassan al-Asiri has tried to attack the U.S. three times, officials say]

John Pistole, a former senior FBI official who also led the Transportation Security Administration during the Obama administration, said Asiri is a major concern for U.S. counterterrorism officials.

"To my knowledge, he's still out there, and he shares his recipes with a number of people," Pistole said. Restrictions like those

announced this week, he said, "are a way of trying to be as tailored as much as possible to reduce the risk."

Pistole, now president of Anderson University in Indiana, said aviation security officials are particularly concerned about explosive devices built with non-metallic materials, because most of the world's airports lack the screening measures to detect such bombs.

New limitations on carry-on items "are both an actual physical deterrent and an overall deterrent so the bad guys see this and say, 'They're onto us.' That's a win for the good guys," Pistole said, "because then you have time to push the terrorists off to another location, another time, another type of attack. It gives law enforcement and security services more opportunity to identify and disrupt plots."

So why not ban electronic devices from planes entirely? People familiar with the discussions said the restrictions were designed to defeat the particular type of threat that is of greatest concern: the possibility that terrorists could smuggle explosives inside electronics and manually detonate them once on a plane. In the case of the "underwear bomber" plot of 2009, for example, the would-be attacker had to mix two chemicals to create the explosive once he was on board the airliner.

(Daron Taylor/The Washington Post)

The six nations affected by President Trump's executive action on immigration are not actually countries where terrorists who have carried out fatal attacks the United States came from. President Trump signed an executive order temporarily banning entry to the U.S. from six mostly Muslim countries. (Daron Taylor/The Washington Post)

Federal officials initially described the ban as indefinite. But David Lapan, a spokesman for the Department of Homeland Security, said the directive runs until Oct. 14 and could be extended for another year "should the evaluation of the threat remain the same."

[Second federal judge blocks revised Trump travel ban]

James Norton, who was a ranking official at the Department of Homeland Security when a ban on liquids went into effect just over a decade ago, said a sudden change such as this signals a significant threat.

"It seems fairly urgent," said Norton, who now runs a homeland security

consulting firm. "My initial reaction is this is based on some sort of information that the intelligence community came across as a whole. They are trying to address it working with the airlines and the countries directly, trying to implement some sort of a plan."

The ban on liquids was implemented Aug. 10, 2006, after British and U.S. intelligence uncovered a plot to simultaneously blow up as many as 10 U.S.-bound passenger jets with liquid explosives hidden in carry-on luggage. Authorities arrested 24 suspects that day and launched new security measures that snarled air traffic. Travelers had to undergo special inspections after drinks and most other liquids and gels were banned as carry-on items (later rules allowed small amounts of liquids and gels, but with tight restrictions).

"That happened overnight based on a bunch of arrests on an incredible threat," Norton said. This week's new rules suggest an urgency to bar devices from U.S.-bound aircraft from those specific countries.

"Evidence can be anything," Norton said. "It is hard to know until they make some sort of announcement in terms of why they are doing this — why they picked those countries and those flights. My guess is, just like with the liquid ban, that they came across a potential threat."

The decision to announce the British ban was made during a meeting on aviation security measures Tuesday by British Prime Minister Theresa May, who had chaired similar meetings over the past few weeks. British authorities said they contacted U.S. officials before the announcement.

It's unclear when the British ban will take effect. "The affected airlines have already been informed, and we expect the measures to be in place in the next couple of days," a government spokesman said. He added that six British and eight foreign carriers will be affected.

[Travel groups say they support enhanced security measures but want to hear justification for electronics ban]

A spokesman for the prime minister's office said the measures were based on the "same intelligence the U.S. relies on."

British terrorism experts were baffled by the move, however, and said the differing specifics of the American and British bans seemed contradictory, especially in regard to the selection of countries. The U.S. ban includes airports from several nations that are not affected by the British restrictions.

This "may be linked to the Trump administration's emphasis on displaying an abundance of caution when addressing the threat of terrorism to the U.S., regardless of the potential impact this may have on relations with partners and allies," said Daniel Falkiner, a London-based security analyst.

"In contrast, the U.K. has very close political and security ties with the gulf states, for example, which may mean London is more content than Washington is with the security protocols at major regional hubs like Dubai," Falkiner said.

Lapan, the DHS spokesman, said it would be up to British officials to explain why they included flights from countries not covered by the U.S. ban.

"Outside of intel or threat assessments, governments make decisions on various factors affecting their countries and residents," Lapan said via email.

Security experts also said it would be extremely unusual for the British government to announce such extensive restrictions — affecting flights from locales favored by British tourists, such as Tunisia and Egypt — without the emergence of new details in recent weeks.

But another U.S. security expert questioned how the ban was implemented.

"Why should I feel safer if the laptop is stowed in the belly of the plane and the perpetrator can use his iPhone to set it off?" asked a senior official with an international travel organization. "I'm not personally privy to what [information] the TSA or DHS has, but I just don't get it."

The official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because he works in the industry, said the logistics of enforcing the ban will be daunting, particularly in instances where passengers take connecting flights elsewhere in the world before boarding a plane bound for the United States.

"You've got to wonder, if somebody's connecting and doesn't have access to his checked bag to put his laptop in, what does he do?" the official asked. "I guess people will figure out that if you're connecting in Casablanca, you'd better have your laptop in your checked bag."

Some civil rights activists raised concerns about the intelligence behind the ban.

"The administration hasn't provided a security rationale that makes sense for this measure targeting travelers from airports in Muslim-majority countries," said Hina

Shamsi, director of the ACLU's National Security Project. "Given the administration's already poor track record, this policy sends a signal of discriminatory targeting and must be heavily scrutinized."

Under the restrictions, travelers to the United States from 10 mostly Middle Eastern airports will be required to put all personal electronic devices larger than a cellphone or smartphone in their checked baggage. U.S. airlines are not affected by the ban because none offer direct U.S.-bound flights from the affected airports.

Ten airports in eight countries — Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Qatar, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates — are affected. Officials said the airports were selected based on the "current threat picture."

Officials said airlines will have 96 hours to comply with the restrictions. Carriers that fail to do so risk losing their authorization to operate in the United States.

The airports are: Queen Alia International Airport (AMM) in Jordan, Cairo International Airport (CAI) in Egypt, Istanbul Ataturk Airport (IST) in Turkey, King Abdulaziz International Airport (JED) and King Khalid International Airport (RUH) in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait International Airport (KWI) in Kuwait, Mohammed V International Airport (CMN) in Morocco, Hamad International Airport (DOH) in Qatar, and Dubai International Airport (DXB) and Abu Dhabi International Airport (AUH) in the United Arab Emirates.

Officials said the change will affect passengers who travel on about 50 daily flights. Neither the U.S. nor British ban includes crew members.

Turkey's transport minister, Ahmet Arslan, criticized the ban, telling reporters in Ankara that it was not "beneficial" for passengers and that Turkey already has stringent security measures in place, according to Turkey's semi-official Anadolu news agency. He added that Turkish officials had spoken about the regulations with their American counterparts and were discussing whether the Trump administration should "step back."

The ban was first made public Monday afternoon — not by administration officials but in a tweet sent by Royal Jordanian Airlines. Initially, U.S. officials declined to comment on the report, saying only that they would provide an update "when appropriate." The official announcement came early Tuesday.

Local Headlines newsletter

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U.S. officials began outlining the new rules to carriers Sunday.

The International Air Transport Association, which represents international

carriers, issued a statement Tuesday saying a number of airlines had been contacted by the TSA in regard to the new U.S. restrictions.

"IATA is working with its members and the TSA to achieve greater clarity on required actions," the statement said. The group asked travelers going through the affected

airports to add extra time to their travels.

"Safety and security is the top priority of everyone involved in aviation," the statement said. "Airlines comply with government requirements and they can do this most effectively when measures are well coordinated."

Barrett and Lazo reported from Washington. Lori Aratani, Ashley Halsey and Carol Morello in Washington and Zeynep Karatas in Istanbul contributed to this report.

The New York Times **Devices Banned on Flights From 10 Countries Over ISIS Fears (UNE)**

Ron Nixon, Adam Goldman and Eric Schmitt

In all, airports in 10 countries, stretching from North Africa to the Mideast and into Turkey, are affected by the new restrictions. Both the United States and Britain have imposed the ban on flights from some airports in Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Turkey.

Washington also has restricted some flights from Kuwait, Morocco, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. London, meanwhile, has additionally restricted flights from some airports in Lebanon and Tunisia.

The targeting of a jetliner using explosives shows how the Islamic State, which has long worked to inspire terrorist attacks, is trying to compete with groups like Al Qaeda's affiliate in Yemen. The Qaeda affiliate has spent years inventing explosives that are difficult to detect, including trying to disguise bombs in devices like cellphones. Now, American intelligence officials believe the Islamic State has also developed explosives that can be hidden in electronic devices, one of the senior counterterrorism officials said.

Representative Peter King, Republican of New York, who sits on the House Intelligence and Homeland Security Committees, said that government officials had called him on Saturday to alert him to the impending ban.

"It was based on intelligence reports that are fairly recent," Mr. King said in a telephone interview. "Intelligence of something possibly planned."

The Department of Homeland Security said the restricted items on flights to the United States included laptop computers, tablets, cameras, travel printers and games bigger than a phone. The restrictions would not apply to aircraft crews, officials said in a briefing to reporters to outline the terms of the ban.

The American ban on electronics applies only to flights on foreign carriers. It does not affect American-operated airlines, since they do not fly directly to the United States from 10 designated airports in eight countries — Amman, Jordan; Cairo; Istanbul; Jidda and Riyadh in Saudi Arabia; Kuwait City; Casablanca, Morocco; Doha, Qatar; and Dubai and Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates. Officials did not say how long the ban would remain in place or if other airports would be added.

In all, an estimated 50 flights each day into the United States would be affected. One of the world's busiest airports, in Abu Dhabi, already requires American-bound passengers to undergo strict screening by United States customs officials before boarding flights. Abu Dhabi is one of 15 airports in the world to employ the Homeland Security preclearance techniques.

Several hours after the American action, the British government announced its own ban on electronic devices on flights.

The British ban affects domestic and foreign airlines, including British Airways, the country's largest. Foreign airlines affected by the order include Turkish Airlines, EgyptAir and Royal Jordanian, among others, and it affects direct flights to the United Kingdom from Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, Tunisia and Saudi Arabia.

A British official said the U.K. ban resulted from the combination of an evolving threat picture and a proliferation of electronic devices that airline passengers carry on board.

Examples of attacks by extremist groups against transportation hubs over the past two years include the October 2015 bombing of an airliner in Egypt, the attempted airliner downing in Somalia last year and armed attacks against airports in Brussels and Istanbul in 2016.

The new bans on electronic devices have prompted a round of protests from passengers who now face the

prospect of flying long hours without the use of laptops or tablets.

Banu Akdenizli, an associate professor of communication at Northwestern University's campus in Doha, complained that the ban would affect her ability to work during a long flight to Greensboro, N.C., for a conference in April.

"This is a 20-hour flight," she said. "I think as an academic or any business traveler, the function of a work flight is to be able to work on it, especially if you're going to a conference."

Osama Sharshar, a prominent Egyptian lawmaker and journalist who frequently travels to the United States, was critical of the changes and suggested President Trump issued the order simply to "please the right-wing extremists in America."

"It will terribly affect me as a journalist, a lawmaker and a regular Egyptian," he said. "I work on planes all the time. And the flight to the States is very long."

The Homeland Security Department's new ban appeared to take officials from some of the affected countries by surprise.

Ahmet Arslan, Turkey's transport, maritime and communication minister, said the ban would be harmful to the United States' airline industry — and to Turkey's.

"Our problem is not how the practice would take place," Mr. Arslan said. "The issue is, it can decrease the comfort of the passengers and reduce the numbers of passengers. We are emphasizing that this is not in the benefit of passengers, and we think that they should step back from this or ease it."

Counterterrorism experts seemed equally divided over the need for the device ban.

Michael Chertoff, the former Homeland Security secretary, said the new policy made sense given the threats to aircraft from explosive

devices and concerns about screening at the targeted airports.

"The challenge is to balance security without making it impossible to fly," Mr. Chertoff said.

But Erroll Southers, director of the Homegrown Violent Extremism Studies Program at the University of Southern California, said the new guidance would do little to enhance security.

"This does little to minimize the threat of a remote-controlled I.E.D.," he said, referring to improvised explosive devices hidden in checked baggage.

American intelligence officials did not cite threats against domestic airports, but one said the Transportation Security Administration has been on heightened alert at several airports. It was not clear if that alert was related to the new restrictions on electronic devices.

The restrictions follow other recent changes the T.S.A. has made in aviation security. Two weeks ago, the agency adopted enhanced pat-down searches for passengers at United States airports, a response to what it said were weaknesses in airport screening measures. Under the new rules, passengers will no longer be allowed to choose what type of searches they undergo in security lines.

Correction: March 21, 2017

An earlier version of this article misidentified an airport subject to the new policy that is one of 15 in the world that employs the Homeland Security preclearance techniques. It is Abu Dhabi International Airport, not Dubai International Airport. The error was repeated in a picture caption.

Susan Carey, Robert Wall, Shane Harris and Margherita Stancati

Updated March 21, 2017 5:25 p.m. ET

The U.S. and Britain banned passengers from carrying most electronics larger than a cellphone into the cabin on flights from a handful of countries in the Middle East and North Africa, responding to what American officials described as the threat of terrorism to global aviation.

The Department of Homeland Security early Tuesday targeted 10 airports from which direct, U.S.-bound flights would be subject to the ban. The department said it was a response to "evaluated intelligence," but didn't provide details.

The U.K. a few hours later said it would enforce similar restrictions, though for a slightly different group of countries, affecting many more passengers because of London's role as an international hub.

The new U.S. policy wasn't based on a specific or near-term threat, but on more general intelligence about an enduring desire by terrorists to hit airlines coming from that region, according to U.S. officials familiar with the matter.

A senior U.S. official said that the policy was discussed last fall during the Obama administration, and that it was considered generally in response to al Qaeda's Yemeni offshoot, a group seen by officials as the most adept among terror groups at bomb making.

Its bomb designs have included explosives hidden inside printer cartridges and batteries for electronics. Concerns about such bombs have spurred previous security alerts.

The rules create new logistical challenges for travelers and airlines. Devices including laptops, tablets and cameras must be checked in. The restrictions are based on the size of a device, a U.S. official said, as a bigger device could provide more space to hide explosives from detection.

The new U.S. restrictions apply to nine airlines flying to the U.S. from Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates.

U.S. officials said the measures were designed to target specific

airports, not specific airlines. But if airlines don't adhere to the new rules, the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration could be asked to block them from flying to the U.S.

The U.S. order affects the big three Persian Gulf carriers, Emirates Airline, Qatar Airways and Etihad Airways. The ban also applies to flights operated by Turkish Airlines, Royal Jordanian, Saudi Arabian Airlines, Royal Air Maroc and Kuwait Airways.

The rules will affect about 50 daily U.S. flights. U.S. officials said they won't be reviewing data on devices in stored luggage and the rule doesn't apply to pilots or crew members. Airlines were given 96 hours to fully comply with Tuesday's order.

No U.S. airlines are affected because they don't directly serve the airports subject to the restrictions. But they do code-share on some of these routes with these foreign airline partners. Those flights would be subject to the new rules.

The surprise rule changes triggered uncertainty across the global aviation industry. In a statement, the International Air Transport Association said that a number of its member airlines had been contacted by the U.S. Transportation Security Administration with regards to the restrictions on electronic items. The global trade group said it is working with its members and the TSA "to achieve greater clarity on required actions."

The new flying rules come at a time of heightened concern about terrorist threats to air travel. Attackers have repeatedly sought to hide explosive devices in electronic equipment and other items to smuggle them past security checks to bring down planes. Al Qaeda has regularly published bomb-making advice online.

Governments wouldn't explain what threats they were trying to counteract with the restrictions. Security experts suggested the U.S. and U.K. may be trying to respond to the threat from manually triggered devices.

The ban also comes on the heels of President Donald Trump's controversial travel ban, which aims to restrict many U.S.-bound travelers from a handful of Muslim-majority countries that Washington

has deemed a particular terrorism risk. That ban targets different countries than the ones affected by the electronics rules.

The U.S. travel ban—currently facing legal challenges and not yet implemented in its latest form—has drawn criticism that it unfairly targets Muslims. The latest move compounded some of the unease in the Middle East.

"Not what you expect from a friendly country," Abdulkhaleq Abdulla, a prominent Emirati political commentator, said on Twitter of the U.S. electronics ban.

Turkey's transportation minister told the private Dogan news agency that Istanbul was in talks with U.S. authorities to "stop or soften" the U.S. restriction on electronics for flights bound from Istanbul to the U.S., according to the Associated Press.

In the U.S., critics said the government hadn't provided enough information to justify the new rules. "Given the administration's already poor track record, this policy sends a signal of discriminatory targeting and must be heavily scrutinized," said Hina Shamsi, director of the National Security Project of the American Civil Liberties Union.

But the action drew some bipartisan support in Washington. California Rep. Adam Schiff, the ranking Democrat on the House intelligence committee, said he had been briefed on the ban by DHS officials over the weekend and supported the security precautions, without detailing any potential threat. "The new ban is both necessary and proportional to the threat," he said.

The U.K.'s separate restriction on in-cabin devices will affect direct flights from Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, Tunisia and Saudi Arabia. There are currently direct flights from Lebanon and Tunisia to the U.K., but not to the U.S.

The U.K., which makes its own security assessments, didn't include the U.A.E., Qatar, Morocco and Kuwait in its new policy, but didn't explain why.

The British policy snags a major Western carrier, British Airways, which will be obliged to conform. In a statement, British Airways referred passengers to the government's policy and advised passengers to arrive early for affected flights.

Qatar Airways, the state-owned national carrier, owns a big stake in British Airways parent International Consolidated Airlines Group SA. Qatar's sovereign-wealth fund also own 20% of Heathrow airport, Britain's international hub.

"We have been in close touch with the Americans to fully understand their position," a U.K. government spokesman said, adding "we will work closely with our international partners to minimize any disruption these new measures may cause." British officials didn't detail any specific threat.

It is unclear if other Western governments are planning policy changes. Canada has yet to decide whether it will follow in the U.S. and U.K. footsteps, the country's transport minister, Marc Garneau said.

German authorities aren't planning new rules, according to a spokesman for the interior ministry in Berlin.

A senior official at the EU, which isn't responsible for national aviation security measures but has wider airline security responsibilities for the region, said he is aware of no new intelligence pointing to a clear new threat. He said he hopes the measures announced don't represent "a new normal" in the U.S. approach to transport security.

"It seems way out of proportion as the same devices in the luggage compartment would be equally dangerous, if not more," he said. "One might even think it is a U.S. measure to augment the travel ban. Canada might go along but for example Australia does not see any need to change their policy."

The ban is a blow to travelers accustomed to bringing tablets, e-readers and laptops to catch up on work or watch movies while flying. Many travelers are loath to check in expensive devices or ones holding sensitive information, in the event of misdirected baggage.

"It's a major irritant, it will cause major concerns to business travelers and other people who want to use their laptops," said Andrew Charlton, managing director of Switzerland-based consultancy Aviation Advocacy.



Wilkinson : How We All Advance Trump's Border-Control Agenda

Francis Wilkinson
Muhammad Ali

was never shy, or average, and over the course of his celebrated life the world took proper note. If you type

"Muhammad Ali death" into Google, you get more than 13 million returns.

So word that his son -- conveniently named Muhammad Ali Jr. -- had been detained for almost two hours

at Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport on Feb. 7 was bound to generate attention. Ali's lawyer, Chris Mancini, said Ali and his mother were stopped by customs agents on their return from a trip to Jamaica.

Mancini said Ali, an American citizen, was questioned about the origin of his name and whether he is a Muslim. Being a lawyer, Mancini naturally made a stink about these claims in the news media. (In a statement to the Washington Post, U.S. Customs and Border Patrol said it "does not discriminate based on religion, race, ethnicity or sexual orientation.")

One goal of President Donald Trump's aggressive posture on matters such as undocumented immigrants in U.S. communities and untrusted Muslims in U.S. airports, is to "take the shackles" off federal agents, as White House press secretary Sean Spicer said.

Freed from their Obama-era chains, Immigration and Customs Enforcement and Border Patrol agents can now spend more time with people such as Ali. Amazingly, Ali and his mother were stalled again later in February, Mancini said, when they sought to fly home to Florida from Washington D.C. A ticket agent told them they couldn't

proceed to the gate. Ali was put on the phone with a Department of Homeland Security agent, who proceeded to interrogate him once more.

"The second instance was clearly retaliation," Mancini said in a telephone interview. "This is an American citizen, born and raised, trying to fly home."

There is always a possibility that the double inconvenience, and intrusive questions, resulted from bureaucratic incompetence. But it's almost as if the government went looking for a conflict with a Muslim with worldwide name recognition and instant access to the news media.

Ever since Sept. 11, American Muslims have complained of receiving extra scrutiny when they fly. Last week, Hassan Aden, a retired North Carolina police chief, was detained at Kennedy International Airport in New York for more than an hour. The difference now, compared with the more measured era of the George W. Bush and Barack Obama administrations, is that the White House all but encourages hostile encounters.

As stories of "unshackled" agents proliferate, they serve the Trump

administration's goals. True, some stories, such as the case of a U.S. citizen who was detained for days in Colorado, provoke outrage. But they also generate news and word of mouth. And that translates, most importantly, into fear.

If Muhammad Ali Jr., an American citizen with one of the most famous names on the planet, can't get through an airport without a hassle, what hope should other Muslims have?

Likewise, when federal agents detain an undocumented woman seeking protection from domestic abuse at a courthouse in El Paso, Texas, other undocumented immigrants get the message clearly: No place is safe.

Government officials know how to encourage self-deportation. "They understand that they don't have the funds to ferret out 11 million people," said David Leopold, former president of the American Immigration Lawyers Association, in an interview. "They're creating an atmosphere that causes fear and trepidation and anxiety not only throughout the undocumented community but throughout the whole country. The object is to make life as miserable as possible so the ones they can't get their hands on will leave."

The news media, opponents of administration policy and immigrants themselves become unwitting accomplices. Word of mouth is how I learned the story of a New York woman, Maura Furfey, a U.S. citizen whose husband and child were briefly detained at Newark Liberty International Airport when they returned home from Mexico. When I tracked her down and asked about it, she said that her husband told her that a fellow passenger on the flight had been drinking and mentioned to a flight attendant that their fair-skinned daughter didn't look like the Mexican father.

That's all it took. The father and the child were detained and interrogated when the plane landed. The father, a green-card holder, was terrified. The daughter, a citizen, was in tears.

None of these people did anything illegal. Yet they were made to feel vulnerable, powerless, afraid. Their stories spread through social networks, the way scary stories do. Trump famously uses his Twitter feed like a blunt instrument of his aggression. Turns out he's using the rest of us the same way.

ETATS-UNIS



Editorial : Neil Gorsuch sticks to the script

Senate Democrats don't have much to work with as they try to derail President Trump's nomination of Neil Gorsuch to serve on the Supreme Court.

They have been unable to unearth any hint of scandal or impropriety in Gorsuch's years as a private lawyer or a judge on Colorado's 10th Circuit.

They weren't able to fluster the nominee during a full day of grilling Tuesday before the Judiciary Committee, during which Gorsuch came across as knowledgeable, folksy and deferential to his questioners, not a fire-breathing ideologue.

They elicited no sign that Gorsuch would be beholden to Trump in what many see as a coming confrontation between the president and the courts. "Nobody is above the law in this country, and that includes the president,"

Gorsuch told the committee, assuring senators he gave the White House "no promises on how I'd rule."

Nor did Democrats have much success in painting the nominee as an out-of-the-mainstream conservative who invariably sides with the powerful over the little guy. He reeled off his rulings in favor of victims of pollution by large companies, young women harassed by college football players, and a Muslim convict in prison.

The closest the Democrats came to rattling the witness was when Sen. Al Franken, D-Minn., sharply questioned him about a case in which Gorsuch parted company with other judges and ruled against a trucker who was fired after refusing in subzero temperatures to stay with his disabled rig when the brakes were frozen. Gorsuch's ruling, Franken suggested, didn't meet the commonsense test.

On the whole, though, the nominee came across during his first day of questioning much as now-Chief Justice John Roberts did at his hearings in 2005: affable and collegial, the quintessential "umpire" as Roberts famously said in his opening statement, who knows it is his job to "call balls and strikes."

But Supreme Court justices, of course, don't just call pitches; they also establish the strike zone in the difficult, gray-area cases that reach the nation's highest court. Legal analyses show that Gorsuch is every bit as conservative as Roberts and perhaps even further to the right.

He is most often compared to the justice he so admires, Antonin Scalia, whose death last year left the vacancy he has been nominated to fill. Gorsuch was recommended to the president by the conservative Heritage Foundation and Federalist

Society, both of whom are championing his confirmation.

It's not only fair but also necessary to find out how conservative his legal thinking is, though Democratic senators had little luck Tuesday. Like all recent nominees, Gorsuch wiggled away from questions, insisting he could say nothing that might hint at the way he'd rule in the future. That's the ethical requirement about cases in litigation or poised to be, but not about all legal matters.

On the critical issue of a woman's right to an abortion, Democrats wanted to know whether he'd respect 1973's *Roe v. Wade* decision, especially because Trump promised voters he'd nominate a justice who would overturn it. Gorsuch did make one point clearly: If the president had asked him during a White House interview to overturn *Roe*, "I would have walked out the door."

Roe "is a precedent ... of the United States Supreme Court," he said in a factually accurate but vacuous response. Testifying earlier, he said that judges start with a "heavy presumption" in favor of precedent, but "in a very few cases you may overrule precedent. It is not an inexorable command." That's as it should be, but it leaves plenty of wiggle room.

The outcome was similar on questions about his views on the

Second Amendment and gun rights, the constitutionality of limits on campaign contributions and the president's latest travel ban.

By staying on pitch-perfect script, Gorsuch leaves Democrats with a difficult, and probably insurmountable, path forward as they seek to block his lifetime appointment.

They can stick with the argument that Gorsuch, 49, is outside the judicial mainstream, even on the

conservative side. Or they can argue — as they have during the hearing — that the seat he would fill was stolen from appeals Judge Merrick Garland, nominated by President Obama last year but shamefully denied a hearing by the Senate's Republican majority. But the Democrats remain outnumbered in the Senate, 52-48, and Gorsuch's performance during the first of two scheduled days of questioning did nothing to shake the solid GOP support for his nomination.

All nominees deserve a fair hearing, and Gorsuch is getting one. Sadly, the public isn't necessarily getting what it deserves — a better understanding of a judge who, if confirmed, will rule on the nation's most important issues for decades to come.



Parker : President Trump's sanest decision

Watching the Senate confirmation hearings of Supreme Court nominee Neil Gorsuch, one might easily find oneself wishing Gorsuch were president of the United States.

Alas, he's not. But Gorsuch's selection to replace Antonin Scalia is the sanest act committed by a president whose first 60 days have left him with an approval rating under 40 percent and persistent questions about his stability.

President Trump should be sending champagne to Gorsuch — for life — for projecting enough grace to benefit those who haven't a knack for it. This, obviously, would include Trump, whose fitful Twitter tantrums tend to overtake any noble aspirations he might pretend to. But then, I delude myself.

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The best conversations on The Washington Post

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The week has not been kind to Trump, though he alone has earned the text that will follow him into history books. Imagine knowing that future generations will read about the Twitter-fevered illusionist who invented stories to distract the crowds, accusing his predecessor,

Barack Obama, of wiretaps in the 2016 presidential campaign.

Imagine knowing what the world now knows — that Trump's paranoid fantasy was just that. Testifying Monday before the House Intelligence Committee, FBI Director James B. Comey said there is no evidence to support the president's claims. He also said that the FBI is actively investigating whether the Trump campaign had any connection to Russian operatives responsible for the hacking of the Democratic National Committee's computers, the contents of which were delivered to WikiLeaks.

Comey's remark that Vladimir Putin hated Hillary Clinton so much that he was trying to hurt her — and if it benefited Trump, fine — seemed to dispel suspicions that Trump himself had anything to do with Russia's blatant interference with U.S. elections. But who knows? Comey was careful to reveal as little as possible about the bureau's findings.

So that was Monday.

Most of the focus Tuesday turned to Day 2 in Gorsuch's confirmation process. Amid much bluster and box-checking by senators on both sides of the aisle, Gorsuch continued to remind everyone why his peers, especially other judges, consider him as qualified as anyone could possibly be. Calm and

unflappable throughout, Gorsuch wore the face of someone accustomed to listening intently without betraying any predisposition or bias.

Democrats naturally had to set out their arguments for their base and spent most of their time questioning Gorsuch's independence and fairness, repeatedly trying to get him to signal whether he would vote to overturn *Roe v. Wade*. Gorsuch said nothing to appease or agitate, pointing instead to his record of participation in 2,700 rulings. He also made assurances that he takes precedent seriously, noting that *Roe* has been reaffirmed multiple times.

Gorsuch's stubborn (and ethical) refusal to offer opinions on precedent spoke directly to his independence. To express an opinion, he said, would damage his credibility and perception of fairness with future litigants. It didn't seem that there was any question that would throw Gorsuch off, which is what usually happens when one is secure in the truth and confident of one's convictions.

But, importantly, all got to make their points, including the repellent Sen. Richard Blumenthal (D-Conn.), whose own record, frankly, should disqualify him as an arbiter of judicial integrity. Here is a man who committed one of the most craven betrayals of his generation — not

sex with an intern, nor trafficking with prostitutes, but stealing valor.

How does a man who embellishes his military career — implying that he fought in Vietnam when, in fact, he received five deferments before serving stateside — consider himself worthy to prosecute the qualifications of one of the nation's most brilliant jurists? When he did serve in the military, Blumenthal was able to secure a cushy position in the Marine Corps Reserve (which is not to impugn his ability to meet the Corps' rigid physical requirements), where he was given such jobs as refurbishing a children's campground and running a Toys for Tots drive.

Not that those aren't important.

Blumenthal did issue a public apology in 2010, saying he had meant that he had served *during* the war, which was and is nonsense. Blumenthal, nonetheless, has found the courage to hit the airwaves and bray his intention to become Gorsuch's fiercest opponent by promising to filibuster.

Gorsuch's hearing should reassure Americans that there are still grown-ups around who are willing to serve. It was also heartening to hear him say that "no man is above the law, no man."



Supreme Court Nominee Neil Gorsuch Deflects Tough Questions From Democrats (UNE)

Jess Bravin

Updated March 21, 2017 11:59 p.m. ET

WASHINGTON—Supreme Court nominee Neil Gorsuch stressed his independence and parried nearly every substantive question hurled at him during a lengthy confirmation hearing Tuesday in which he appeared to avoid any missteps.

Senate Democrats hit Judge Gorsuch with tough questions

throughout the day, but if he continues to avoid the pitfalls of the intensive scrutiny, which is slated to resume Wednesday, his nomination would likely head to the floor next month with a good chance of success.

Judge Gorsuch sidestepped such hotly debated Supreme Court decisions as *Roe v. Wade*, which recognized abortion rights in 1973, and *District of Columbia v. Heller*, which afforded individuals the right to keep handguns in the home in

2008. He also declined to reveal his views on well-established precedents such as *Gideon v. Wainwright*, where in 1963 the Supreme Court unanimously held the Constitution guarantees a lawyer for indigent criminal defendants.

"I'm not in a position to tell you whether I personally like or dislike any precedent," said Judge Gorsuch, who sits on the 10th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in Denver.

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TRUMP'S FIRST 100 DAYS

That reticence also extended to whether Judge Gorsuch favored introducing cameras to transmit Supreme Court proceedings, perhaps the one judicial question on which many Republicans and Democrats agree.

"It's not a question that I confess I've given a great deal of thought to," Judge Gorsuch said. "I would treat it like I would any other case or controversy. I would want to hear the arguments."

Underlying much of the tensions in the hearing was Democrats' ongoing anger that Republican leaders had declined to consider

former President Barack Obama's nominee for the same Supreme Court vacancy, Merrick Garland, chief judge of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit. Mr. Obama, a Democrat, nominated Judge Garland a year ago after the death of Justice Antonin Scalia, but Senate GOP leaders declined to move ahead on the nomination until after the election.

"In recent months foundational elements of our democracy have been challenged and questioned and even undermined, and for that reason I just can't look at your nomination in the comfort of a legal cocoon," Sen. Amy Klobuchar (D., Minn.) said.

"I believe," she said, "we should evaluate your record and philosophy against the backdrop of the real world today."

When he was running for president last year, Donald Trump, a Republican, had promised to nominate a judge who "automatically" would vote to overrule *Roe v. Wade*. More recently, White House Chief of Staff Reince Priebus said that Judge Gorsuch "has the vision of Donald Trump."

At Tuesday's hearing, Republicans sought to immunize Judge Gorsuch, who was appointed to the 10th Circuit by George W. Bush, a Republican, from the Democrats' attacks.

Responding to Sen. Lindsey Graham (R., S.C.), Judge Gorsuch said he never met Mr. Trump until his interview for the Supreme Court. He also said Mr. Trump never asked him to overrule *Roe v. Wade*.

Mr. Graham also asked what the judge would have done had the president asked him to overrule *Roe*. "Senator, I would have walked out the door. It's not what judges do. They don't do it at that end of Pennsylvania Avenue and they shouldn't do it at this end either, respectfully," Judge Gorsuch said.

Democrats said Mr. Trump's presidency demanded more candor than has been customary from judicial nominees, given such statements as his call during the campaign for a ban on Muslims entering the U.S.

"Does the First Amendment allow the use of a religious litmus test for entry into the United States?" asked Sen. Patrick Leahy (D., Vt.).

"Senator, that's an issue that's currently being litigated actively," Judge Gorsuch replied.

Could Mr. Trump "ban all Jews from the United States, or all people that

come from Israel? Would that be an easy question?" Mr. Leahy pushed.

Judge Gorsuch declined to answer.

Since taking office, Mr. Trump has faced criticism for his attacks on judges, including calling one a "so-called judge" after he ruled against the president's executive order on travel.

Judge Gorsuch, in response to a question from Sen. Richard Blumenthal (D., Conn.), said he found these types of attacks objectionable. But he made it clear he wasn't referring to the president's words specifically.

"When anyone criticizes the honesty or integrity or motives of a federal judge, I find that disheartening. I find that demoralizing. Because I know the truth," Judge Gorsuch said, repeating a message he had previously given senators privately. "I know the men and women of the federal judiciary. I know how hard their job is, how much they give up to do it."

Mr. Blumenthal pressed Judge Gorsuch if "anyone" included the president.

"Anyone is anyone," Judge Gorsuch replied.

Later, White House spokesman Sean Spicer tweeted that Judge Gorsuch "spoke broadly and never mentioned any person" in condemning attacks on the judiciary.

Late in the day, Sen. Chris Coons (D., Del.) successfully extracted a substantive view from the nominee. "The Constitution definitely contains privacy rights," Judge Gorsuch said, citing, among other provisions, the rarely invoked Third Amendment, which prevents quartering of troops in private homes during peacetime.

Many senators consider Judge Gorsuch's confirmation a fait accompli, since Democrats lack the votes to block it. Republicans have threatened to eliminate the filibuster for Supreme Court nominees if Democrats employ the procedure to prevent the nomination from reaching the floor.

Against that backdrop, Democrats sought to highlight a broader critique of Republican rule Tuesday, suggesting that Judge Gorsuch is another Republican who favors the wealthy.

"How do we have confidence in you that you won't just be for the big corporations?" Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D., Calif.) asked. "I'm just looking for something that would indicate that you would give a worker a fair shot."

The nominee responded with a full-throated defense of his record.

"If you want cases where I've ruled for the little guy, as well as the big guy, there are plenty of them," he said, among the 2,700 in which he has participated in 11 years on the bench.

Democrats focused most directly on Judge Gorsuch's 2016 dissent in the "frozen trucker" case, where the court majority held that an employer violated labor law by firing a driver who on a cold night unhooked a malfunctioning trailer and drove off in his cab rather than wait for help.

While it might not have been "wise or fair" to fire the driver, Judge Gorsuch said in his dissent, it was permissible because the law only protected drivers who refused to operate a vehicle out of safety concerns. Here, Judge Gorsuch reasoned, the driver was fired for operating the truck, and therefore wasn't covered.

Sen. Al Franken (D., Minn.) rejected that conclusion. "I had a career in identifying absurdity, and I know it when I see it," said Mr. Franken, a former comedian. "It is absurd to say this company is in its rights to fire him because he made the choice [to avoid] possibly dying from freezing to death...It makes me question your judgment."

Judge Gorsuch said he had sympathy for the driver—"my heart goes out to him"—but that his job was to follow the law, not rule based on his feelings about a particular individual.

Overall, Republicans appeared pleased with the nominee's performance Tuesday and Democrats' inability to knock him off the path to confirmation.

"Anybody watching the hearing of Judge Gorsuch can see that he's as well-qualified a nominee for the Supreme Court as we've had," Sen. Chuck Grassley (R., Iowa), the Judiciary Committee chairman, said after the session. "He continues to clear every hurdle the Democrats place in front of him."

But Democrats made it clear they consider Judge Garland the rightful occupant of the Supreme Court seat and continued to raise the issue. Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse (D., R.I.) at one point asked Judge Gorsuch to explain how his judicial philosophy differs from Judge Garland's.

When Judge Gorsuch declined to answer, Mr. Whitehouse said a "dark money" group with undisclosed donors, the Judicial Crisis Network, had spent millions of dollars seeking to block Judge

Garland and millions more to promote Judge Gorsuch.

"What's interesting is that this group sees a huge difference that I don't understand," Mr. Whitehouse said, asking if the nominee could explain it.

The New York Times

Flegenheimer

In response to questions from Senator Patrick J. Leahy, Democrat of Vermont, Judge Gorsuch expressed admiration for Judge Merrick B. Garland, President Barack Obama's nominee for the same Supreme Court vacancy created by the death of Justice Antonin Scalia.

He is "an outstanding judge," Judge Gorsuch said.

"Whenever I see his name attached to an opinion, it's one I read with special care," Judge Gorsuch said.

But he refused to say whether Senate Republicans had mistreated Judge Garland by refusing to consider his nomination for the better part of a year.

"I can't get involved in politics," Judge Gorsuch said. "There's judicial canons that prevent me from doing that. And I think it would be very imprudent of judges to start commenting on political disputes."

Mr. Leahy had no such qualms. "I think it was shameful," he said of the Republicans' gambit. "I think it has severely damaged the reputation of the committee. I think it has severely damaged the reputation of the senators who concurred with that."

On other questions, Judge Gorsuch was less reserved. He did not hesitate, for instance, when asked

"You'd have to ask them," Judge Gorsuch said.

"I can't because I don't know who they are. It's just a front group," Mr. Whitehouse said.

Following a second day of questioning Wednesday, a variety

of legal experts and advocates for both sides are expected to appear before the committee, though they are unlikely to have any impact on the outcome.

The Judiciary panel is set to vote April 3, and for now appears likely to send the nomination to the

Senate floor. Republicans hold an 11-9 advantage on the committee.

Gorsuch Says He'd Rule Against Trump if Law Required It (UNE)

Adam Liptak and Matt

to declare his independence from Mr. Trump.

"Specifically tell us whether you'd have any trouble ruling against the president who appointed you," Senator Charles E. Grassley, the Iowa Republican who leads the Judiciary Committee, instructed him.

"That's a softball, Mr. Chairman," Judge Gorsuch said. "I have no difficulty ruling against or for any party, other than based on what the law and the facts and the particular case require."

During the presidential campaign, Mr. Trump said he would seek to appoint justices ready to vote to overturn Roe v. Wade, the 1973 decision establishing a constitutional right to abortion.

But Judge Gorsuch said that no one from the White House asked him to make any commitments on legal issues that could come before the Supreme Court.

"I have offered no promises on how I'd rule in any case to anyone," he said, "and I don't think it's appropriate for a judge to do so, no matter who's doing the asking."

Senator Lindsey Graham, Republican of South Carolina, asked Judge Gorsuch how he would have responded had Mr. Trump asked him to vote to overrule Roe during his interview at Trump Tower.

"Senator, I would have walked out the door," Judge Gorsuch said.

Asked about Roe and countless other Supreme Court decisions, Judge Gorsuch responded with variations on a theme. The rulings were entitled to respect as precedents of the Supreme Court, he said, and should not be overturned lightly.

"If I were to start telling you which are my favorite precedents or which are my least favorite precedents or if I view a precedent in that fashion," Judge Gorsuch said, "I would be tipping my hand and suggesting to litigants that I've already made up my mind about their cases."

Republicans largely used their questioning to help insulate Judge Gorsuch from expected criticism, offering 30-minute safe harbors. Senator Ted Cruz of Texas was perhaps the most creative, coaxing Judge Gorsuch to hold forth on "The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy," judicial basketball games and the rodeo practice of "mutton busting."

And for Democrats still straining to determine how aggressively to counter Judge Gorsuch's nomination, the proceedings on Tuesday offered little help. At times, after fits of effective sidestepping from the nominee, they paused for several seconds to regroup, looking through their notes anew.

Efforts to make the hearings a referendum, in part, on Mr. Trump himself also faltered.

Mr. Leahy pressed Judge Gorsuch on Mr. Trump's order banning travel from several predominantly Muslim

countries. "Senator, that's an issue that's currently being litigated actively, as you know," Judge Gorsuch said, declining to weigh in.

Mr. Leahy said that some Republicans had argued that a rapid confirmation for Judge Gorsuch could represent the administration's best chance of winning a case on this issue before the Supreme Court.

"Senator, a lot of people say a lot of silly things," Judge Gorsuch said, adding that anyone making that argument "has no idea how I'd rule in that case." He said he would not tip his hand on Tuesday.

Democratic senators pressed Judge Gorsuch about his involvement as a Justice Department lawyer in 2005 and 2006 defending Bush administration policies on harsh interrogation and surveillance. Judge Gorsuch responded that he had been a lawyer defending a client.

Mr. Leahy also asked if the president's national security determinations were reviewable by the court.

"Senator, no man is above the law," the judge said.

Judge Gorsuch, who had criticized liberals for preferring litigation to the political process in an essay written before he became a judge, distanced himself from his earlier statements.

The Washington Post

Supreme Court nominee Gorsuch stresses his independence from President Trump (UNE)

<https://www.facebook.com/pages/E-d-OKeefe/147995121918931>

Judge Neil Gorsuch stressed his independence and defended the integrity of the federal judiciary Tuesday as the Senate hearings on his Supreme Court nomination turned on the search for his judicial philosophy and what one senator called "the elephant in the room" — President Trump.

From the first question from a friendly Republican to a grilling by a Democrat hours later, Gorsuch was

called upon on the second day of what is expected to be four days of hearings to assert his impartiality and reassure senators that he would not be swayed by political pressure if he wins confirmation, which appeared even more likely after his marathon session.

Gorsuch reiterated in public what he had told many senators in private — that he is offended by attacks like the ones leveled by President Trump against federal judges who have ruled in the past year in cases involving him.

"When anyone criticizes the honesty or the integrity or the motives of a federal judge, I find that disheartening. I find that demoralizing — because I know the truth," Gorsuch told Sen. Richard Blumenthal (D-Conn.).

"Anyone including the president of the United States?" Blumenthal asked, who had made the elephant-in-the-room comment.

(Video: Reuters)

During his confirmation hearing, President Trump's Supreme Court

nominee Judge Neil Gorsuch said an attack from anyone - including the president - on the motives of the federal judiciary is "disheartening" and "demoralizing." Judge Neil Gorsuch says an attack from anyone - including the president - on the motives of the federal judiciary is "disheartening" and "demoralizing." (Photo: Photo: Ricky Carioti/The Washington Post/Video: Reuters)

"Anyone is anyone," Gorsuch said.

Gorsuch declined, however, to comment specifically on Trump's

various criticisms of federal judges, including an Indiana-born judge of Mexican descent who handled a federal lawsuit involving an online university bearing Trump's name and the "so-called" judge who ruled against the president's first attempt to ban travelers from Muslim-dominant countries from entering the United States.

"I've gone as far as I can go ethically," Gorsuch told Blumenthal.

It was a dramatic moment in a day that for the most part lacked color. Gorsuch refused to be pinned down on most of the issues that Democrats raised: his allegiance to *Roe v. Wade*, his views on money in politics, the reach of the Second Amendment.

He portrayed what Democrats saw as controversial rulings in his 10 years on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 10th Circuit in Denver as authentic attempts to interpret the laws that Congress writes.

"If we got it wrong, I'm very sorry, but we did our level best," he said about a decision criticized by Sen. Richard J. Durbin (D-Ill.), but added: "It was affirmed by the Supreme Court."

Sen. Al Franken (D-Minn.) questioned Gorsuch's ruling in what has become a celebrated case of a trucker who was fired after unhitching his trailer in subzero weather and driving away in search of warmth and safety. Gorsuch was the lone dissenter in saying a federal law did not protect the driver, but Franken said the judge could have ruled that a strict interpretation of the law would lead to an absurd result.

"I had a career in identifying absurdity, and I know it when I see it," Franken said.

Republican senators did little more than set up Gorsuch, 49, to display an encyclopedic knowledge of the Constitution and Supreme Court precedent, and to allow him to stress his roots as an outdoorsy Westerner.

"What's the largest trout you've ever caught?" asked Sen. Jeff Flake (R-Ariz.).

Gorsuch will be at the witness table again Wednesday as well as the fourth and final day of hearings scheduled for Thursday.

Gorsuch seemed happy at the outset of the hearing to take what even he called the "softball" question offered by Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman Charles E. Grassley (R-Iowa) about whether he would have any trouble

ruling against Trump, the man who nominated him.

"I have no difficulty ruling against or for any party other than based on what the law and the facts of a particular case require," Gorsuch told the panel. "And I'm heartened by the support I have received from people who recognize that there's no such thing as a Republican judge or a Democratic judge — we just have judges in this country.

"My personal views . . . I leave those at home," he added later.

The Columbia-Oxford-Harvard graduate employed a homespun tone — "gosh," "golly" and "nope" punctuated his answers. Corny dad jokes fell flat, especially with the Democratic senators.

They pressed him on abortion, gun rights, privacy and the protracted 2000 presidential campaign recount. As other Supreme Court nominees have, Gorsuch explained that it would be improper to give his views on cases that might come before him or to grade decisions made in the past.

He had a tense encounter with Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse (D-R.I.), who sparred with him on issues of campaign finance and "dark money," including a \$10 million campaign by the group Judicial Crisis Network to advocate for Gorsuch's confirmation.

Whitehouse said the group's donors do not have to be disclosed, and he wondered what they saw in Gorsuch that would warrant such an expenditure.

"You'd have to ask them," Gorsuch said.

"I can't because I don't know who they are," Whitehouse shot back.

Democrats questioned him about his work at former president George W. Bush's Justice Department and whether he'd rule against Trump's travel ban.

Gorsuch declined to express his views on Trump's move to ban travelers from several Muslim-majority countries because "that's an issue that is currently being litigated actively."

When Sen. Patrick J. Leahy (D-Vt.) mentioned that a Republican lawmaker recently suggested that Gorsuch would uphold Trump's ban if it came before the court, Gorsuch snapped: "Senator, he has no idea how I'd rule in that case."

[Gorsuch promises independence from Trump — and steals Democrats' line of attack]

Other senators quizzed Gorsuch about several of Trump's past statements. During the presidential campaign last year, Trump said that he would nominate people to the Supreme Court who would overrule *Roe v. Wade* and return decisions on abortion to the states.

Sen. Lindsey O. Graham (R-S.C.) asked Gorsuch whether Trump had asked him to do that during his interview before his nomination.

"Senator, I would have walked out the door," Gorsuch replied. In questioning later, Gorsuch said Trump did mention abortion being a "divisive" issue but then moved to other topics.

It was at least the second time senators had pressed Gorsuch on what Trump had said he was looking for in a Supreme Court justice. Gorsuch said he does not believe in litmus tests and was never questioned about them.

Each senator was allotted up to 30 minutes to question Gorsuch during the first round of questions. A second round, scheduled to begin Wednesday morning, gives senators an additional 20 minutes to quiz the nominee.

The committee's top Democrat, Sen. Dianne Feinstein (Calif.), asked about Gorsuch's work on issues involving enhanced interrogation of suspected terrorist detainees while he served in Bush's Justice Department.

Even though the issue has been in the news during the past week, Gorsuch said he did not remember a document released last week in which he was preparing talking points for the then-attorney general. "Yes," is handwritten next to a typed question: "Have the aggressive interrogation techniques employed by the Admin yielded any valuable intelligence?"

[Senate Democrats want more information about Gorsuch's role at DOJ]

Feinstein said she would supply Gorsuch with the documents for future questioning. In general, Gorsuch portrayed himself as a facilitator rather than a policymaker during his 14 months at the Justice Department in 2005 and 2006.

"I was a lawyer for a client," he said.

Feinstein asked about Gorsuch's role in designing a signing statement for Bush on a detainee treatment law; she characterized it as indicating that the president did not feel bound by the law he had just signed.

"I certainly never would have counseled anyone not to obey the law," Gorsuch responded.

Gorsuch also forcefully rejected claims by one of his former law school students that he had suggested that women take advantage of maternity leave policies by not telling the truth in job interviews about their plans to have families. Democrats had seized on the accusations when they surfaced Sunday and vowed to ask Gorsuch about them.

When Durbin asked about the topic, Gorsuch explained that he has taught ethics classes at the University of Colorado Law School for several years. Based on his years of teaching young law students, he said that employers in the corporate world, particularly law firms, continue to treat women poorly and often ask inappropriate questions in job interviews that are used to weed out female applicants who plan to have children.

Republicans intend to move quickly on confirming Gorsuch. Those on the Judiciary Committee hope to refer him to the full Senate on April 3 so that he can be confirmed before Easter.

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But Senate Minority Leader Charles E. Schumer (D-N.Y.) warned Republicans on Tuesday that his party would attempt to slow down consideration of Gorsuch because Republicans last year blocked then-President Barack Obama's attempts to fill the vacancy created by Justice Antonin Scalia's death, and because Trump's presidential campaign is the subject of an ongoing FBI investigation.

Schumer said it seemed "unseemly to be moving forward so fast on confirming a Supreme Court justice with a lifetime appointment" due to the looming FBI investigation, which could potentially last for months or years.

"You can bet that if the shoe was on the other foot — and a Democratic president was under investigation by the FBI — that Republicans would be howling at the moon about filling a Supreme Court seat in such circumstances," Schumer added.



Psaki : Trump's credibility is shot

Jen Psaki, a CNN political commentator and spring fellow at the Georgetown Institute of Politics and Public Service, served as the White House communications director and State Department spokeswoman during the Obama administration. Follow her: @jrpsaki. The opinions expressed in this commentary are hers.

(CNN)Monday was a turning point for Donald Trump's credibility. He had fibbed about crowd numbers, and pushed crazy conspiracy stories about illegal voters. But continuing to claim that former President Obama ordered the wiretapping of Trump Tower, even after the sitting

FBI and NSA directors made clear it was false, was a new low.

So why does it matter?

The right question isn't whether a President's credibility matters, but what matters more than credibility?

When a President travels overseas, it is his credibility, as a global leader, as a fair arbiter that can make the difference in getting a deal done.

And it is the credibility of a President that can help pull a few more members of Congress over the finish line to get an important bill passed.

There are times in every presidency -- whether it is a terrible shooting like the one in Newtown, Connecticut, that killed 20 children, or an attack on our citizens like 9/11 -- when the country looks to the President, of either party, to ease concerns, to tell them it is going to be OK, to bring people together to mourn, to grieve and sometimes to be strong. That requires credibility and trust. That is something that is not mandated by an election, but is earned.

This White House has not faced a crisis yet. It has created its own, but it has not been challenged as every White House and every President is

by events out of their control. This administration has not been forced to move beyond partisanship and beyond Twitter to comfort grieving parents, to ease fear, to even solve crises in communities like we faced in Flint, Michigan, or with the Gulf Coast oil spill.

And when Trump and his staff do face a crisis, it is clear they have undervalued the importance of Trump's credibility for not just his supporters, but the country he is supposed to be governing.



Editorial : A President's Credibility

March 21, 2017 7:28 p.m. ET

1006 COMMENTS

If President Trump announces that North Korea launched a missile that landed within 100 miles of Hawaii, would most Americans believe him? Would the rest of the world? We're not sure, which speaks to the damage that Mr. Trump is doing to his Presidency with his seemingly endless stream of exaggerations, evidence-free accusations, implausible denials and other falsehoods.

The latest example is Mr. Trump's refusal to back off his Saturday morning tweet of three weeks ago that he had "found out that [Barack] Obama had my 'wires tapped' in Trump Tower just before the victory" on Election Day. He has offered no evidence for his claim, and a parade of intelligence officials, senior Republicans and Democrats have since said they have seen no such evidence.

Yet the President clings to his assertion like a drunk to an empty gin bottle, rolling out his press spokesman to make more dubious claims. Sean Spicer—who doesn't

deserve this treatment—was dispatched last week to repeat an assertion by a Fox News commentator that perhaps the Obama Administration had subcontracted the wiretap to British intelligence.

That bungle led to a public denial from the British Government Communications Headquarters, and British news reports said the U.S. apologized. But then the White House claimed there was no apology. For the sake of grasping for any evidence to back up his original tweet, and the sin of pride in not admitting error, Mr. Trump had his spokesman repeat an unchecked TV claim that insulted an ally.

The wiretap tweet is also costing Mr. Trump politically as he hands his opponents a sword. Mr. Trump has a legitimate question about why the U.S. was listening to his former National Security Adviser Michael Flynn, and who leaked news of his meeting with the Russian ambassador. But that question never gets a hearing because the near-daily repudiation of his false tweet is a bigger media story.

FBI director James Comey also took revenge on Monday by joining the queue of those saying the bureau has no evidence to back up the wiretap tweet. Mr. Comey even took the unusual step of confirming that the FBI is investigating ties between the Trump election campaign and Russia.

Mr. Comey said he could make such a public admission only in "unusual circumstances," but why now? Could the wiretap tweet have made Mr. Comey angry because it implied the FBI was involved in illegal surveillance? Mr. Trump blundered in keeping Mr. Comey in the job after the election, but now the President can't fire the man leading an investigation into his campaign even if he wants to.

All of this continues the pattern from the campaign that Mr. Trump is his own worst political enemy. He survived his many false claims as a candidate because his core supporters treated it as mere hyperbole and his opponent was untrustworthy Hillary Clinton. But now he's President, and he needs support beyond the Breitbart cheering section that will excuse

anything. As he is learning with the health-care bill, Mr. Trump needs partners in his own party to pass his agenda. He also needs friends abroad who are willing to trust him when he asks for support, not least in a crisis.

This week should be dominated by the smooth political sailing for Mr. Trump's Supreme Court nominee and the progress of health-care reform on Capitol Hill. These are historic events, and success will show he can deliver on his promises. But instead the week has been dominated by the news that he was repudiated by his own FBI director.

Two months into his Presidency, Gallup has Mr. Trump's approval rating at 39%. No doubt Mr. Trump considers that fake news, but if he doesn't show more respect for the truth most Americans may conclude he's a fake President.

Appeared in the Mar. 22, 2017, print edition.



Editorial : A Republican Health Care Bill in Search of a Problem

Republican leaders in the House have been huddling over the last few days in a frantic search for enough votes to win passage of their proposed revision of Obamacare, in the process making an already flawed bill even worse. One measure of their desperation was a cynical last-minute provision that would shift Medicaid costs from New York's rural and suburban counties to the state government, pleasing upstate Republicans who

represent those counties but reducing coverage provided by the state.

Such wheeling and dealing has done nothing to improve a bill that would rip coverage from 24 million people over 10 years, leaving more Americans uninsured than if Congress simply repealed the Affordable Care Act, and inspiring an official of the American College of Physicians, which represents 148,000 doctors and medical

students, to say on Monday that he had "never seen a bill that will do more harm to health."

In 38 years advocating for doctors, patients I've never seen a bill that will do more harm to health than #AHCA bill being voted on Thursday

— Bob Doherty (@BobDohertyACP) March 20, 2017

It also reflects a fundamental reality: Unlike President Barack Obama, whose clear objective was to expand access to medical care, the Republicans have no coherent idea or shared vision of what they want to achieve and what problem they mean to solve.

Do they want to cover nearly as many as are covered under the A.C.A.? A few senators, like Susan Collins of Maine and Bill Cassidy of Louisiana, say they do, but a

majority from the party are not willing to spend the money that would be needed to do that. Or do they want to significantly reduce government spending and regulation of health care, leaving Americans to navigate the free market on their own? Conservatives like Senator Rand Paul of Kentucky and Representative Mark Meadows of North Carolina are arguing for that, but the rest of the congressional Republicans do not want to go down this treacherous path.

In place of a common vision is a truly unappetizing stew. Modest

subsidies to help people buy insurance are the Mini-Me versions of Obamacare policies, so reduced as to be almost completely useless to millions of people, especially older and lower-income people and those in states with high medical costs, such as Alaska, North Carolina and Oklahoma — all of which happen to have voted for Mr. Trump. Another provision is an old conservative hobby horse championed by people like House Speaker Paul Ryan: cutting federal spending on Medicaid, which provides insurance to 74 million poor, disabled and elderly Americans. The main goal here is to

cut taxes for the rich, even though the change would devastate beneficiaries, state government budgets and public hospitals.

The bottom line: The Republican proposal would not increase “competition and consumer choice” as Mr. Ryan claims. It certainly wouldn’t deliver on President Trump’s promise of “insurance for everybody.” And it wouldn’t be the full repeal of the A.C.A., or Obamacare, that many Republicans have been promising their base for the last seven years. That is why some hard-liners say they will oppose the new bill, which the

House is expected to vote on as early as Thursday.

In a better world, this bill would never have seen the light of day, much less be offered for a vote. It is no fair-minded person’s vision of what the American health care system should look like. It is designed to let Mr. Ryan and Mr. Trump declare that they have driven a stake through the heart of Obamacare, no matter the collateral damage to millions of Americans.



Galston : The GOP Is Out of Excuses on Health Care

William A. Galston

Although this week got off to a crackling start with high-profile hearings on Judge Neil Gorsuch’s Supreme Court nomination and potential Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election, the event with the largest consequences for the Trump administration and the Republican congressional majority occurs on Thursday. That’s when the full House takes up legislation to repeal and replace the Affordable Care Act.

It is no accident that the Republican legislative agenda kicks off with this issue. For seven years, GOP leaders have promised their base that they would get rid of ObamaCare. After regaining a House majority in 2010, they didn’t come close to doing it. After regaining a Senate majority in 2014, they sent a bill to President Obama, who promptly vetoed it. In 2016 they held on to their majorities in both chambers and the American people elected a president who pledged to sign a repeal-and-replace bill when it reached his desk.

Republicans are out of excuses. Failing to unite around a bill that fulfills their most visible pledge to their constituents would destroy their credibility and open the door to electoral catastrophe.

But during their seven years of promises, Republicans never really got serious about either the consequences of repeal or the content of the replacement. They knew the bill they passed in 2015 would not become law, freeing them to score political points. Now that they have the responsibility to govern, tectonic cracks in party unity have emerged.

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More in Health Care

House conservatives in the Freedom Caucus failed to extract what they demanded from Speaker Paul Ryan, despite energetic efforts to enlist White House support for their cause. There’s a reason why most of their amendments were rejected. To attain 216 votes with no Democratic support, the speaker has engaged in a delicate balancing act between hard-right conservatives, who command around 40 votes, and the other 197 members of his Republican caucus.

Counterbalancing the Freedom Caucus is the center-right Tuesday Group, co-chaired by Reps. Charlie Dent, Tom MacArthur and Elise Stefanik. Of its 51 members, only a handful come from Southern and border states, and none at all from Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina or South Carolina. By contrast, seven hail from Pennsylvania and six each from New York and Ohio.

Although many in the Tuesday Group represent solidly Republican districts, their constituents are less conservative and less systematically hostile to the federal government than are most Republicans south of the Mason-Dixon Line. If the House leadership had accepted the hard right’s demands, they would have risked

losing vital support from these center-right representatives. Instead, the concessions the leadership made to the centrists have secured additional support for the health-care bill.

On Thursday, barring unexpected developments, members of the Freedom Caucus will face a choice—withdraw their votes and bring down a bill supported by the House leadership and President Trump, or surrender to pressure and disappoint constituents who are urging them to stand firm. It will be a rare moment of truth in a murky process.

Assuming that Mr. Ryan threads the needle on Thursday and gets 216 votes, the House bill in its current form cannot succeed in the Senate. Nearly a dozen Republican senators—including Ted Cruz, Mike Lee and Rand Paul—have indicated serious reservations.

On a recent trip to her home state, Iowa’s Joni Ernst, a conservative rock star during her 2014 race, said that Republicans must “move cautiously. . . . It is much more complicated than simply saying ‘repeal ObamaCare.’” That nearly 200,000 Iowans have gained insurance coverage under ObamaCare is probably a relevant consideration.

Other Republican senators elected in 2014—Cory Gardner, Shelley Moore Capito, Bill Cassidy, Steve Daines—have expressed similar doubts. Arkansas’s Tom Cotton, not hitherto known as a voice of restraint, is also counseling caution, because he doesn’t think the House bill will work for the people of his state. It’s easy to see why: Arkansas chose to accept the ObamaCare option of expanding Medicaid. The number of uninsured Arkansans could more than double, from 211,000 to 561,000, if the ACA is repealed.

I doubt it has escaped Sen. Mitch McConnell's notice that these newly elected senators are the reason he became majority leader in 2015. Mr. McConnell is under no obligation to accept the House bill as his point of

departure, and he has a chance to adopt a fresh approach.

At some point, some leader will be clear-eyed enough to see, and brave enough to say, that

Americans would fare better if both parties were involved in this conversation. Why not Mitch McConnell, a thoroughly unsentimental realist?

Appeared in the Mar. 22, 2017, print edition.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Trump Warns House GOP to Support Health-Care Bill or Risk Losing Votes in 2018 (UNE)

Stephanie Armour, Kristina Peterson and Siobhan Hughes

Updated March 21, 2017 9:07 p.m. ET

WASHINGTON—President Donald Trump on Tuesday put his political capital on the line in a late effort to save the House Republican legislation that aims to replace the Affordable Care Act, but he didn't immediately win over the conservative holdouts who could scuttle the bill.

Mr. Trump traveled to Capitol Hill and delivered a warning to House Republicans that they would lose seats in 2018 if they didn't follow through on their promise to repeal former President Barack Obama's health law.

In a closed-door meeting of GOP members, Mr. Trump singled out the leader of the conservative House Freedom Caucus, Rep. Mark Meadows (R., N.C.), and cautioned him to drop his opposition to the bill.

"At the end, I think Mark's going to be with me, right?" Rep. Fred Upton (R., Mich.) recounted Mr. Trump as saying.

- Ryan's Leadership Is Tested by GOP's Civil War on Health Bill

Passage of a House bill to dismantle the Affordable Care Act would vindicate the collaborative style of House Speaker Paul Ryan. Failure could undermine his clout—and endanger the rest of the House GOP agenda.

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- Partisan Lines Harden on Probe of Russia Ties

The public confirmation this week that federal investigators are probing links between the Russian government and associates of Donald Trump's presidential campaign prompted Democrats to renew their call for an independent investigation.

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- Donald Trump's Bumpy Early Weeks Slow His Agenda

Halfway through President Trump's first 100 days in office, controversies and GOP legislative infighting are making it hard for the White House to build momentum toward some of its ambitious agenda items.

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- Gorsuch Fends Off Tough Questions From Democrats

Supreme Court nominee Neil Gorsuch stressed his independence and parried nearly every substantive question hurled at him during a lengthy confirmation hearing Tuesday in which he appeared to avoid any missteps.

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- Team Trump Meets a Messy World

In fits and starts, the Trump administration is trying to show it values traditional allies and alliances, despite the president's rhetoric suggesting the contrary. Good thing, because America's allies and alliances are under exceptional stress, Gerald F. Seib writes.

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TRUMP'S FIRST 100 DAYS

Some lawmakers added that Mr. Trump said he would make life uncomfortable for Mr. Meadows if he didn't change his stance, a comment that some took to be in jest and others as more threatening.

Several lawmakers said the president told the group: "I'm afraid you're going to blow it."

Mr. Meadows, whose bloc claims it has enough votes to defeat the bill, said he wasn't convinced by Mr. Trump—a sign GOP leaders have more work to do to secure the votes needed to pass the bill.

"It won't lower premiums, and until it does, I'm going to be a 'no,' even if it sends me home," Mr. Meadows said of the legislation after the president addressed lawmakers.

"As a person, I love him," said Rep. Rod Blum (R., Iowa), after the president's presentation. Hearing

from Mr. Trump "was a lot of fun. But it didn't change me at all."

Some House Republicans privately said Mr. Trump's lobbying for the bill would make it harder for conservatives to vote against the legislation. All House Democrats are expected to oppose the bill. The full House is expected to vote on the legislation on Thursday.

The high-pressure sales pitch has underscored the stakes for Mr. Trump and House Republican leaders, who have said they need to act quickly to move on to other important issues, such as an overhaul of tax policy.

A senior White House official said Tuesday that the administration had been disappointed by the decision of some conservative groups to withhold support from the bill, but had secured other important conservative endorsements on Tuesday.

Mr. Trump met later in the day with a group of centrist Republican House members, some of whom remain undecided, while others lean against the bill. The centrists discussed their desire to boost financial support to older Americans, as well as other issues important to their districts, the official said.

On Tuesday night, Messrs. Ryan and Trump repeated their pitch at a fundraising dinner for House Republicans. Mr. Ryan told the crowd that "on Thursday, we should go out and deliver on our promise" and he hoped everyone would "stand with President Trump."

Mr. Trump said the elections had given the party "clear instructions" and "that legislative effort begins with Thursday's crucial vote" on the health bill.

House leaders sought to satisfy conservatives Monday with changes to the bill, including an optional work requirement for certain Medicaid beneficiaries.

But some members of the Freedom Caucus, which met to discuss the legislation on Tuesday after Mr. Trump's pitch, want a speedier phaseout of the Medicaid expansion that took place under the ACA. They also want to strip the bill of a new set of tax credits to help people

buy insurance if they don't get it at work.

Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer (D., N.Y.), addressing those late changes, said he was concerned about the number of Americans who would lose health insurance. "The changes they announced last night amount to a fresh coat of paint on an old jalopy," Mr. Schumer said. "The car still won't run, the bill still won't help the American people."

Conservative lawmakers are being squeezed between groups lining up on different sides of the legislation.

Antiabortion groups, such as the National Right to Life Committee, favor the legislation and have said they would include it on their scorecards of key votes. They support the bill's one-year ban on Medicaid funding to Planned Parenthood clinics. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce also said it backed the bill and would hold lawmakers accountable for not following suit.

But Heritage Action, the political arm of the conservative Heritage Foundation, says it wants lawmakers to withhold support, because the bill fails to strip many of the ACA's insurance requirements that they believe have driven up premiums.

Opposing Mr. Trump could prove costly for Republican lawmakers, some political analysts said. In the 2016 elections, then-Sen. Kelly Ayotte lost re-election in New Hampshire after breaking with Mr. Trump following the release of a videotape in which he made crude comments about women.

"What we do know is from the last election there is evidence that Republicans who crossed Trump paid a political price in general elections," said David Wasserman, the House editor at the Cook Political Report.

The legislation would overturn large parts of the 2010 health law passed by Democrats and replace it with a system largely built on tax credits and cuts to Medicaid.

The proposal would leave 24 million more people uninsured in 2026, compared with maintaining the ACA, according to a report from the

Congressional Budget Office that was done before changes were made to the bill Monday. It would

also reduce the federal deficit by \$337 billion over the next decade.

—Peter Nicholas
and Louise Radnofsky
contributed to this article.

**The
New York
Times**

Trump Warns House Republicans: Repeal Health Law or Lose Your Seats (UNE)

Julie Hirschfeld Davis, Thomas Kaplan and Robert Pear

Despite the day's feverish efforts — a combination of cajoling, browbeating and horse-trading that recalled Democrats' efforts to pass the law in 2010 — White House and congressional officials conceded Tuesday that they still lacked the votes to pass the bill. As many as three dozen Republicans remain opposed or unpersuaded, according to one aide with knowledge of the process, who spoke on condition of anonymity to describe internal discussions.

It is not clear whether Mr. Trump would be able to exact a political price from Republicans who opposed the measure; conservative groups including the Club for Growth and Heritage Action for America were lining up against the legislation and pressuring lawmakers to oppose it, raising questions about whether it would be possible to mount a successful primary challenge to defectors. And some Republicans said the political peril would be greater if they supported the health care bill, which they said failed to achieve their goals or those of their constituents.

"I think if we do do this, we lose the majority," said Representative Mo Brooks, an Alabama Republican and a member of the Freedom Caucus, who said he remained opposed.

Representative Leonard Lance of New Jersey, one of the nearly two dozen Republicans from districts that Mr. Trump lost in 2016, said he was leaning strongly toward a "no" vote. "I campaigned in support of a repeal-and-replace bill that would make health care more affordable and accessible and provide a smooth transition to those who were forced into Obamacare through no fault of their own," Mr. Lance said.

**THE WALL
STREET
JOURNAL**
COMMENTS

The House health-care bill is gaining momentum, and on Monday night the GOP posted amendments meant to add fence-sitters to the coalition. Don't discount the stakes: The vote scheduled for Thursday is a linchpin moment for this Congress, and a test of whether the

"The bill, as currently drafted, does none of these things."

It is also not clear whether Mr. Trump, whose popularity has fallen from what was already a historically low point since he took office, is capable of rallying the public behind a plan that is also viewed negatively. Mr. Trump's approval rating sank to 37 percent in Gallup's daily tracking poll on Monday. That is only slightly higher than the 34 percent who favor the health measure, according to a Fox News poll last week, compared with 54 percent who were opposed.

The use of a political threat was a classic tactic for Mr. Trump, who keeps a running mental tally of his backers and detractors, and frequently boasts of his efforts to exact revenge from those who have crossed him.

"We're going to make sure to remember those who stood by us, and who stood by the word that they gave to their voters," said Sean Spicer, the White House press secretary.

Mr. Trump has not focused on the specifics of the health care bill, arguing in recent days that he is more concerned with pushing it through Congress so he can move on to issues he cares more about, including a large tax cut.

At a fund-raiser for House Republicans on Tuesday night, Mr. Trump said he was eager to cut taxes, but had "no choice" but "to go with the health care first."

But he has been putting the full power of the White House behind the effort to sell the health bill.

Besides his meeting at the Capitol on Tuesday, he met at the White House with about a dozen members of the centrist Tuesday Group. On Wednesday morning, he is

scheduled to meet with members of the Freedom Caucus. Over the weekend, he summoned three prominent conservative critics — Mr. Meadows, Senator Ted Cruz of Texas and Senator Mike Lee of Utah — to his Mar-a-Lago estate in Florida for meetings with Stephen K. Bannon, his chief strategist, to discuss their concerns about the bill.

"He made it very clear he's all in on this legislation," said Representative Kevin Brady, Republican of Texas and the chairman of the Ways and Means Committee. "This is a historic moment and a historic promise for Republicans to deliver on this Thursday."

Speaker Paul D. Ryan was upbeat after the Capitol meeting. "The president just came here and knocked the ball out of the park," he said. "He knocked the cover off the ball."

But Mr. Meadows said he was neither bothered nor persuaded by Mr. Trump's warning that he would lose his constituents' support if he did not fall in line.

"I believe that I'm representing them in opposing this bill, because it won't lower premiums," he said. "Until it does, I'm going to be a 'no,' even if it sends me home."

A prime concern for holdouts was the measure's lack of provisions to relax federal health insurance regulations that require insurers to provide certain minimum benefits and to spend certain percentages of premium revenues on medical care.

White House officials argued privately that if they included such language in the bill, they would run into procedural problems in the Senate, where the measure is to be considered under special rules that apply to "budget reconciliation" bills.

and no bill ever is, but the reality is that a no vote is a vote for the ObamaCare status quo.

If the bill dies, Republicans will have shown they can't unite around a governing agenda, Democrats will be emboldened in their resistance, and the likelihood is that more of President Trump's and Congress's priorities get pulled into the whirlpool. The GOP will head into the autumn stranded with the

Those rules allow such legislation to be approved with a simple majority — meaning Republicans could push the bill through without any Democratic backing — but to qualify, the provisions must affect spending or revenues.

For other House members, the bill has been an opportunity to deal. Mr. Trump promised Representative Mario Diaz-Balart, Republican of Florida, that he would hold to his pledge to consider reversing President Barack Obama's opening with Cuba if Mr. Diaz-Balart backed the measure, the White House official said, which he did in the Budget Committee last week.

Representative Claudia Tenney, Republican of New York, said she was likely to support the bill after House leaders added a section that would shift Medicaid costs from New York's counties to the state government.

House leaders also included provisions to allow states to impose a work requirement for certain able-bodied Medicaid beneficiaries, and to allow states to choose a lump-sum block grant to fund Medicaid.

Both of those provisions were meant to win over conservatives, and Mr. Ryan presented the health bill on Tuesday as an improved product that had been refined as much as possible to reflect lawmakers' concerns — and that now needed to be approved so lawmakers could fulfill their promise to repeal the health law.

"In this day and age, and in this business, in politics, if you get 85 percent of what you want, that's pretty darn good," he told reporters.

rapidly deteriorating ObamaCare insurance exchanges, and the media will provide no cover for the alibi of blaming Democrats.

House passage would provide the double dividend that any useful reform pays: Credit for promises kept, and then credit from voters who benefit from solutions to problems they confront personally, such as being rescued from ObamaCare's cycle of rising

Editorial : A Defining Health Vote

March 21, 2017
7:25 p.m. ET 208

Comments

For seven years and across four elections, Republicans have promised to repeal and replace ObamaCare if entrusted with the Presidency and House and Senate majorities. Now they have the opportunity to dispose of the failing law and begin to stand up a more market-oriented, patient-centered system. The reform isn't perfect,

premiums and declining choices. If Republicans don't crack up, they also have the power to modernize Medicaid, reduce the growth of government, increase individual liberty and start to restrain the bureaucratic hold over medicine. These are all good for America.

Tuesday's amendments are mostly modest, not least because the bill is a consensus document that has been negotiated for months. The new concessions are designed to balance an ideologically diverse caucus, with some sweeteners pulling the bill toward conservatives and others moderating it for the centrists.

Maybe the most substantive change is language that creates fiscal space for the Senate to increase the value of the tax credits for people age 50 to 64. These advanceable, refundable credits already rise with age, but some Senators and Congressmen fear they are not generous enough for those near retirement with high medical expenses. More aid to this constituency may be the price of passage, though the danger is that the credits are getting too unwieldy and complicated.

The Medicaid refinements are also mixed. Governors will gain the legal ability to include work requirements akin to those in the 1996 welfare reform, which will help reduce

dependency and improve upward mobility for the able-bodied, working-age, childless adults that ObamaCare added to the rolls.

The amendments retain per capita block grants, which will begin to wind down federal Medicaid micromanagement and put the program on a budget. But now states could opt for a traditional block grant with expedited approval and more flexibility. There are also technical changes that will minimize the incentives for the 19 holdout states to expand Medicaid.

One major disappointment is that the new version changes the annual index for increasing the block grants from medical inflation to medical inflation plus one percentage point for some beneficiaries. Medical inflation alone is not an ambitious target, and block grants that grow too quickly over time offer less discipline to control costs. Multiple government funding formulas that reward more spending help explain why U.S. health spending is so high.

On that score, the other big disappointment is that the House didn't restore the cap on the tax exclusion for employer-sponsored insurance. First-dollar health benefits obtained through the workplace aren't taxed, and this open-ended subsidy has helped turbocharge spending even for low-value care. People using the individual market get no such

subsidy, and they still don't if they don't qualify for ObamaCare. Conservatives have been trying to correct this tax bias—and create more equity between individual and employer-provided insurance—for generations.

The irony is that the most conservative Members demanded that the tax cap be left out. They claimed it was a tax increase, but why should Goldman Sachs executives get a tax subsidy that average Americans don't? The new tax credits will improve equity, but a cap on the exclusion at, say, the 90th percentile of high-cost insurance would moderate the trajectory of health spending.

Also on the tax side, the revised bill now accelerates the repeal of most ObamaCare taxes to this year instead waiting until 2018. This helpful change will make it less likely that Americans hold off on investment decisions until next year to get the lower tax rate.

The House bill is a messy, complex compromise, but then the GOP has inherited a messy, complex failure in ObamaCare. The House Freedom Caucus's claim that repeal alone would produce some free-market wonderland is a fantasy. The health market of 2009 no longer exists, and even then it wasn't great. Repeal without replace would lead to market chaos

and patient horror stories that discredit free-market reform.

Democrats built the entitlement state in stages, and it will have to be reformed in stages that are politically sustainable. The House bill is merely the beginning—a reform beachhead that Republicans can take and then gradually make more progress if voters begin to trust Republican solutions.

Health-care reform is always politically fraught because Americans feel its effect so acutely in their pocketbooks and care. But having promised to do something, Republicans have to try. If they retreat after years of selling repeal and replace, voters will conclude the party can't be trusted and that Democrats must be right about GOP extremism. Republicans don't have any more excuses, like the presence of Barack Obama in the White House.

Thursday's vote is an inflection point that will define the Trump Presidency and the reform dimensions of this Congress. Will they run for cover, or kill the achievable in the name of the perfect bill that will never pass? Or they can show that this GOP majority has solutions, and send this bill to the Senate.

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With health-care vote, Republicans seek to prove they can get things done

The Christian Science Monitor

March 21, 2017 Washington—On Tuesday morning, President Trump came to the basement conference room of House Republicans to do what he was supposedly born to do: Seal the deal. In this case, that meant lining up enough House votes to pass the GOP plan to repeal and replace the Affordable Care Act on Thursday.

The closer-in-chief talked up the huge opportunity to deliver on a major promise to voters. He also pointed to the political cost of failure to deliver – singling out Rep. Mark Meadows, the leader of the hard-line House Freedom Caucus. The North Carolinian opposes the GOP health-care bill.

Mr. Trump's involvement has intensified as the House nears its do-or-die vote on the American Health Care Act, the Republican effort to replace Obamacare. Last week, Trump invited more than a dozen conservatives to the White House, worked out a compromise

with them, then proudly announced they had all flipped to "yes" votes.

Compromise is not exactly what House Republicans are known for. But it will be necessary if they are to pass their first big legislative test as a governing party this week. While the outcome is still up in the air, the "party of no" is trying mightily to prove that it can get things done, with leaders urging members to back the bill, even if they don't get everything they want.

"They've been in blocking mode. I think they are starting to learn that they have to govern," says John Feehery, spokesman for Republican Dennis Hastert of Illinois when he was speaker during the George W. Bush presidency.

To get to "yes," House leaders have worked out a compromise amendment to the bill to lure moderates and conservatives. It promises more financial help to older Americans whose premiums are expected to skyrocket under the

GOP plan – \$85 billion to people between 50 and 65 years old.

To appease conservatives, it gives states more flexibility in running Medicaid, the federal-state program for the poor – for instance by allowing them the option to institute a work requirement for able-bodied recipients.

The amendment is changing some minds, with several Republicans coming on board. "This is a bill that I think has come a long way," said Rep. Tom MacArthur (R) of New Jersey on Tuesday. He now supports the bill.

Compromise is an adjustment. For eight years, Republicans worked hard to thwart much of President Barack Obama's agenda – through a partial government shutdown, in the courts, and legislatively. In both houses, the majority of Republicans have never known anything but being in the opposition.

In the House, only 60 Republicans – a mere quarter of their members –

have served in the majority when a Republican occupied the White House.

The opposition mind-set is starting to change, said Rep. Hal Rogers (R) of Kentucky, a congressman with more than three decades under his belt.

"I think there is beginning to be a realization of 'Hey, we're in charge here, and we've got to cast some maybe personally unpopular [votes] in order to lead,'" he said after the president's visit Tuesday.

Negotiations at Mar-a-Lago

Another sign of that realization: The Freedom Caucus has decided not to vote as a block on the health-care bill, but to leave this one up to individual members to decide. Representative Meadows has also reached out to moderates in the House and Senate, in addition to an intense weekend of negotiation with White House aides in Mar-a-Lago over the weekend.

He's still a "no" vote, and says there are enough opponents in the caucus to sink the bill – and perhaps wrangle more concessions. But one Freedom Caucus member in the group that visited with Trump last week has been convinced. That presidential attention is itself another sign of a party intent on getting things done.

"Neither Republicans nor Democrats have seen any charm offensive coming from the White House in many years, and a little goes a long way," says former Rep. Matt Salmon (R) of Arizona, who retired from Congress last year and used to belong to the Freedom Caucus.

Despite many aspects of the plan that appeal to Republicans – the elimination of penalties associated with the individual and employee mandates of

Obamacare and a reduction of federal deficits by \$337 billion within 10 years – the legislation encountered a fierce political tornado last week.

That's when the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office estimated that 24 million people would lose coverage by 2026 under the plan. Federal contributions to Medicaid would drop by \$880 billion over the same period. The program would be radically changed, with open-ended federal payments capped based on the number of people a state has enrolled in Medicaid. That cheers budget hawks but has some governors reeling.

Additionally, the plan would hit older, low-income Americans particularly hard, with premiums for a 64-year-old soaring from \$1,700 a year to more than \$14,000.

Steep road ahead

The path to passage is particularly steep for House Speaker Paul Ryan (R) of Wisconsin. He can afford to lose only 21 votes. The Freedom Caucus alone has roughly 30 members and then there are Republicans from swing districts and members of the moderate Tuesday Group to convince.

Democrats are hammering home the "crushing costs" of Trumpcare's "age tax." On average, only 30 percent of voters approve of the Republican bill, compared with 47 percent who oppose it, according to Nate Silver's FiveThirtyEight blog.

Meanwhile, if the bill passes and is taken up by the Senate next week, enough moderate and conservative Republicans stand opposed that it has no chance of passing there as-

is – even with the compromises added this week.

"In this day and age, in this business, in politics, if you get 85 percent of what you want, that's pretty darn good," said Speaker Ryan, talking with reporters after the president's visit and enumerating the compromises added to accommodate members' suggestions.

If Republicans want to keep their "rendezvous with destiny," as the speaker put it, they'll have to give a little. It's part of governing. Whether enough Republicans will see it that way is the question.



Trump to GOP critics of health care bill: 'I'm gonna come after you' (UNE)

<https://www.facebook.com/costareports>

President Trump spent Tuesday selling the Republican health-care overhaul to skeptical House members, warning his party that failure would endanger his legislative agenda and their own political careers.

But more than two dozen GOP lawmakers remained firmly opposed to the legislation amid the high-stakes persuasion campaign led by Trump and House Speaker Paul D. Ryan (R-Wis.) — more than enough to block the bill ahead of a planned Thursday vote.

House passage would represent a powerful, if symbolic, achievement for both men — and failure would send leaders back to the drawing board on a key issue that Trump and congressional Republicans promised voters they would address. Even if the House approves the package, the legislation faces an uphill battle in the Senate.

The holdouts are mainly hard-line conservatives who believe that the bill, known as the American Health Care Act, does not do nearly enough to undo the Affordable Care Act passed by Democrats in 2010. But they also include moderates who fear that the bill will imperil their constituents and their party's prospects at the ballot box.

In a morning address to a closed-door meeting of House Republicans, Trump used both charm and admonishment as he made his case, reassuring skittish

members that they would gain seats in Congress if the bill passed.

(Reuters)

White House press secretary Sean Spicer on March 21 said President Trump "had some fun" at the "expense" of Rep. Mark Meadows (R-N.C.), a critic of the House Republicans' health-care bill. Trump told Meadows earlier in the day that he would "come after" him. White House press secretary Sean Spicer on March 21 says President Trump "had some fun" at the "expense" of Rep. Mark Meadows (R-N.C.) earlier in the day. (Reuters)

He singled out Rep. Mark Meadows (R-N.C.), the chairman of the House Freedom Caucus, which has led the right-wing opposition to the bill.

"I'm gonna come after you, but I know I won't have to, because I know you'll vote 'yes,'" Trump said, according to several lawmakers who attended the meeting. "Honestly, a loss is not acceptable, folks."

Trump's remarks — which Meadows said he took as good-natured ribbing — reflected his mounting urgency to secure a major legislative victory in the early months of his presidency and fulfill a central campaign promise by repealing the signature domestic achievement of President Barack Obama. Passing a health-care measure is key to unlocking momentum for the president's other legislative priorities, such as tax reform and infrastructure spending.

"He wants to get this bill done," said Sen. David Perdue (R-Ga.), a

Trump ally. "I don't hear that as a threat. It's a statement of reality."

In interviews, more than two dozen lawmakers said they were either firmly opposed to the bill or leaning toward voting against it. Ryan can lose only 21 members of his party for the bill to succeed, as no Democrats have pledged to support the package.

Several Republicans privately said Tuesday that the Thursday vote could be postponed if leaders are unable to secure enough firm votes for passage beforehand.

One top Republican not authorized to speak about the whipping process said the leadership remained confident that it would collect enough support but was weighing scheduling options.

What's next for the Obamacare replacement bill

"The White House is engaged, the leadership is engaged, everyone is working together," the Republican said. "But this is the House GOP, and you can't assume that it's going to go perfect. You leave options," meaning a vote on Friday or even the weekend.

A second Republican, also not authorized to discuss internal deliberations, said others in the leadership orbit were eager to bring the bill to the floor, even if the count is narrow, because they would like opponents to take ownership of their position and the consequences of what it would mean for the president.

Addressing reporters Tuesday, Ryan played down the possibility

that the bill could fail Thursday and argued that conservatives should be pleased that many of their demands will probably be in the legislation. Adding further changes, he said, could jeopardize the legislation's chances in the Senate.

"If you get 85 percent of what you want, that's pretty darn good," he said. "We don't want to put something in this bill that the Senate is telling us is fatal."

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) sounded a cautiously optimistic note Tuesday, promising that the Senate would forge ahead with plans for votes on the measure — if it passed the House first.

"If the House passes something, I will bring it up," McConnell said. "We'll try to move it across the floor next week."

On Tuesday afternoon, Trump hosted more than a dozen members of the Tuesday Group, a moderate House faction, in the Oval Office for a lower-key lobbying session that involved the president asking each person to relay their concerns about the bill.

On Friday, a similar meeting helped Trump win converts among members of the Republican Study Committee, a key conservative bloc. But on Tuesday, he found more resistance.

Going into the White House meeting, Rep. Leonard Lance (R-N.J.) described himself as "a strong lean no," citing a variety of concerns. "My views are based on fundamentals in the legislation," he

said. "I don't see the lower premiums in this bill."

After the meeting, he said his views had hardened: "I'm a no," he told reporters.

The meeting came less than 24 hours after GOP leaders released changes to the bill that they believe are sufficient to win a House majority.

Many of the changes were made to placate conservatives, including giving states the option to take a fixed Medicaid block grant and to impose work requirements on childless, able-bodied adults covered under the program. Others responded to broader concerns about the sufficiency of the tax credits offered to help Americans purchase insurance.

One revision was more narrowly targeted — added at the behest of a group of Upstate New York Republicans who wanted to end their state's practice of commandeering local tax revenue to fund state Medicaid benefits.

That compounded the concerns of Rep. Daniel Donovan (R-N.Y.), a Tuesday Group member who represents parts of New York City that would be hurt by the change.

"I have four hospital systems in my

district; they are my biggest employers," he said. "All of them have grave concerns about how they are going to survive if this gets passed."

After the White House session, Donovan said he welcomed the meeting with Trump but had not reached a final decision: "We'll know on Thursday. Some of these things have to be addressed."

One surprising holdout was Rep. Lou Barletta (R-Pa.), who was among the first House members to endorse Trump and has emerged as one of his most stalwart backers. But he is a hard-liner on illegal immigration and cited the issue Tuesday in opposing the bill.

The tax credits offered under the GOP plan, he said, could be claimed by individuals who are not "lawfully in this country and eligible to receive them."

"I would have a hard time explaining to families in the 11th District ... why they should be helping to pay for the health expenses of someone who broke the law to get here and has no right to those federal dollars," he said.

But it was Trump's warning to Meadows that sent the sharpest message Tuesday. "He was kidding

around — I think," said Rep. Harold Rogers (R-Ky.), a bill supporter.

White House press secretary Sean Spicer said later in the day: "Mark Meadows is a longtime, early supporter of the president. He had some fun at his expense this morning during the conference meeting."

Asked whether Trump believed that Republicans who opposed the bill would be damaged at the ballot box, Spicer answered: "I think they'll probably pay a price at home."

Spicer explained that statement was not a threat but "a political reality."

Meadows told reporters that he had a "sincere and deep friendship" with Trump and appreciated the many hours of negotiation that were involved in the package. But he remained firmly against the bill absent major changes that Trump and Ryan have now ruled out.

"This is not a personality decision; this is a policy decision," Meadows said. "It won't lower premiums, and until it does, I'm going to be a no, even if it sends me home."

The Freedom Caucus has not taken a formal position to oppose the bill, but it appeared Tuesday that the bulk of the caucus's roughly three

dozen members stood ready to vote it down.

Two caucus members who said they could support the bill — Rep. David Schweikert (R-Ariz.) and Rep. H. Morgan Griffith (R-Va.) — both serve on the committees that wrote it.

The others insisted that the Freedom Caucus would hold fast. "I personally know of more than 21 House members who are pretty strong no's," said Rep. Rod Blum (R-Iowa). "So when [GOP leaders] say they've got the numbers, they don't have the numbers."

Blum said he was not concerned by Trump's implied threat that he could face an electoral challenge next year if he opposed the bill: Trump won his northeastern Iowa district by three points, but Blum won it by eight points.

"I outperformed the president, so I'm not worried about that," he said. "They know who I am, and they know that I care about them, and they know I'll stand up to my own leadership. I'll stand up to the president of the United States, I'll stand up for what I think is right."

The New York Times Trump Lays Plans to Reverse Obama's Climate Change Legacy (UNE)

Coral Davenport

In an announcement that could come as soon as Thursday or as late as next month, according to people familiar with the White House's planning, Mr. Trump will order Mr. Pruitt to withdraw and rewrite a set of Obama-era regulations known as the Clean Power Plan, according to a draft document obtained by The New York Times. The Obama rule was devised to shut down hundreds of heavily polluting coal-fired power plants and freeze construction of new coal plants, while replacing them with vast wind and solar farms.

The draft also lays out options for legally blocking or weakening about a half-dozen additional Obama-era executive orders and policies on climate change.

At a campaign-style rally on Monday in the coal-mining state of Kentucky, Mr. Trump told a cheering audience that he is preparing an executive action that would "save our wonderful coal miners from continuing to be put out of work."

Experts in environmental law say it will not be possible for Mr. Trump to quickly or simply roll back the most substantive elements of Mr. Obama's climate change regulations, noting that the process presents a steep legal challenge that could take many years and is likely to end up before the Supreme Court. Economists are skeptical that a rollback of the rules would restore lost coal jobs because the demand for coal has been steadily shrinking for years.

Scientists and climate policy advocates around the world say they are watching the administration's global warming actions and statements with deep worry. Many reacted with deep concern to Mr. Pruitt's remarks this month that he did not believe carbon dioxide was a primary driver of climate change, a statement at odds with the global scientific consensus. They also noted the remarks last week by Mick Mulvaney, the director of the White House Office of Management and Budget, in justifying Mr. Trump's proposed cuts to climate change research programs.

"As to climate change, I think the president was fairly straightforward: We're not spending money on that

anymore," Mr. Mulvaney said at a White House briefing.

"The message they are sending to the rest of the world is that they don't believe climate change is serious. It's shocking to see such a degree of ignorance from the United States," said Mario J. Molina, a Nobel Prize-winning scientist from Mexico who advises nations on climate change policy.

The policy reversals also signal that Mr. Trump has no intention of following through on Mr. Obama's formal pledges under the Paris accord, under which nearly every country in the world submitted plans detailing actions to limit global warming over the coming decade.

Under the accord as it stands, the United States has pledged to reduce its greenhouse pollution about 26 percent from 2005 levels by 2025. That can be achieved only if the United States not only implements the Clean Power Plan and tailpipe-pollution rules, but also tightens them or adds more policies in future years.

"The message clearly is, 'We won't do what the United States has promised to do,'" Mr. Molina said.

In addition to directing Mr. Pruitt to withdraw the Clean Power Plan, the draft order instructs Attorney General Jeff Sessions to request that a federal court halt consideration of a 28-state lawsuit against the regulation. The case was argued before the United States Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit in September, and the court is expected to release a decision in the coming months on whether to uphold or strike down the rule.

According to the draft, Mr. Trump is also expected to announce that he will lift a moratorium on new coal mining leases on public lands that had been announced last year by the Obama administration.

He is also expected to order White House economists to revisit an Obama-era budgeting metric known as the social cost of carbon. Economists and policy makers used the metric to place a dollar cost on the economic impact of planet-warming carbon dioxide pollution: about \$36 per ton. That measure formed the Obama administration's economic justification for issuing climate change regulations that would harm some industries, such as coal mining, noting that those costs would be outweighed by the

economic benefits of preventing billions of tons of planet-warming pollution.

Eliminating or lowering the social cost of carbon could provide the Trump administration the economic justification for putting forth less-stringent regulations.

The draft order would also rescind an executive order by Mr. Obama that all federal agencies take climate change into account when considering any form of environmental permitting.

Unlike the rollback of the power plant and vehicle regulations, which could take years and will be subject

to legal challenges, Mr. Trump can make the changes to the coal mining ban and undo Mr. Obama's executive orders with the stroke of a pen.

White House staff members and energy lobbyists who work closely with them say they have been expecting Mr. Trump to make the climate change announcements for weeks, ever since Mr. Pruitt was confirmed to head the E.P.A. on Feb. 17, but the announcement has been repeatedly rescheduled. The delays of the one-page announcement have largely been a result of disorganization and a chaotic policy and planning process, said people familiar with that

process who asked to speak anonymously to avoid angering Mr. Trump.

One reason for the confusion, these people said, is internal disputes about the challenging legal process required to dismantle the Clean Power Plan. While Mr. Trump may announce with great fanfare his intent to roll back the regulations, the legal steps required to fulfill that announcement are lengthy and the outcome uncertain.

"Trump's announcements have zero impact," said Richard J. Lazarus, a professor of environmental law at Harvard. "They don't change existing law at all."

Much of that task will now fall to Mr. Pruitt.

"To undo the rule, the E.P.A. will now have to follow the same procedure that was followed to put the regulations in place," said Mr. Lazarus, pointing to a multiyear process of proposing draft rules, gathering public comment and forming a legal defense against an expected barrage of lawsuits almost certain to end up before the Supreme Court.