

National Security

Trump lays groundwork to change U.S. role in the world

By Karen DeYoung and Philip Rucker

President Trump began this week to reshape the U.S. role in the world, laying the groundwork, in a series of planned and signed executive actions and statements, for the “America first” foreign policy on which he campaigned.

Already, Trump has mandated construction of a border wall with Mexico and a clampdown on local immigration enforcement. Other directives drafted but not yet signed would halt all refugee admissions and entry into the United States of citizens from seven Muslim-majority countries deemed terrorist hotbeds; declare a moratorium on new multilateral treaties; and mandate audits of U.S. funding for international organizations, including the United Nations, with a view toward cutting U.S. voluntary contributions by 40 percent.

Additional pending orders, copies of which were obtained by The Washington Post, call for a review of cyber capabilities and vulnerabilities, in advance of what is expected to be greater use of offensive powers; and direct the Pentagon to quickly develop plans to reduce spending on items not deemed “highest priority,” while ramping up programs to expand the armed forces and modernize the U.S. nuclear deterrent.

Another draft order under consideration would direct the State Department to review its designations of foreign terrorist organizations, allowing it to add the Muslim Brotherhood to the list, according to an administration official who was not authorized to discuss it. The

group's status as a legitimate political movement vs. a terrorist group is controversial in the Middle East. Such a listing would please some, including Egypt and Saudi Arabia, but could anger others, such as Turkey and Qatar.



Trump could sign some of these orders as early as Friday during a scheduled visit to the Pentagon. The White House declined to comment on the directives.

If implemented, these initiatives and other steps **Trump has previewed will usher in a new era of American foreign policy**, after decades of bipartisan agreement that the United States has a responsibility to spread democracy and stand up for the oppressed, and that it would prosper when a united, free world prospered.

In the policies Trump has outlined, there are no apparent trade-offs to be made that balance short-term American advantage with global goals benefiting the United States over the longer term. Instead, as a policy posted on the White House website on Inauguration Day put it, “The world will be more peaceful and more prosperous with a stronger and more respected America.”

“Every decision on trade, on taxes, on immigration, on foreign affairs will be made to benefit American workers and American families,” Trump said in his inauguration speech. “We

must protect our borders from the ravages of other countries making our products, stealing our companies and destroying our jobs. Protection will lead to great prosperity and strength.”

[Read the draft of the executive order on treaties]

Trump sees himself as the protector of an American fortress and disrupter of a world that is growing more calamitous and dangerous by the day. “The world is a total mess,” he said Wednesday in an interview with ABC News.

At times, it is difficult to determine whether he is laying down the law or establishing a negotiating position. Having pushed Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto into a corner on funding the border wall, the administration indicated Thursday that it considered Mexico’s cancellation of a presidential visit to Washington a mere postponement.

Kori Schake, a former national security official in the George W. Bush administration who opposed Trump’s candidacy, said the executive orders are already causing political damage with U.S. allies. “It’s consistent with the way in which President Trump creates chaos and moves blithely on,” she said.

Many of Trump’s ideas are not new, although they draw from a wide political spectrum. Trump’s reimagining of a new 21st-century architecture for world order, including a sharp reduction in U.S. participation in international institutions, has been a rallying cry for conservatives for years.

[Read the draft of the executive order on U.S. funding]

His words and actions reflect “a view that the status quo that has essentially grown up over the last 70 years costs the U.S. more than it benefits it,” said Richard N. Haass, president of the Council on Foreign Relations and a senior official in the George H.W. Bush administration. That view, extending from trade policy to traditional alliances, Haass said, “is fundamentally flawed in its assumption that American involvement and leadership in the world has cost us more than it’s gained us, but that nonetheless appears to be their vision.”

The United Nations, with its welter of sometimes obscure sub-organizations, and the platform it often provides for criticism of the United States, has been a long-standing target.

Two of the treaties that Trump's proposed executive order makes particular mention of as forcing adherence to "radical domestic agendas" — the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and the Convention on the Rights of the Child — are traditional bull's eyes. Like many other U.N.-generated treaties, they have never been ratified by the United States.

Trump proposes internal high-level committees to examine multilateral treaties, with a view toward leaving them, as well as a 40 percent cut in funding for international organizations whose agendas are "contrary to American interests." It is unclear whether the intent is to cut funds for U.N. activities such as peacekeeping forces and humanitarian programs, as well as those, already targeted by Trump, that support Palestinians and other groups out of favor with the new administration.

John B. Bellinger III, who served as legal counsel to both the National Security Council and the State Department in the George W. Bush administration, said the treaty examination was based on a "false premise . . . that the United States has become party to numerous multi-lateral treaties that are not in the United States' interest."

There are "many hundreds of multilateral treaties that help Americans every day in concrete ways," he said. Without them, "Americans could not have our letters delivered in foreign countries; could not fly over foreign countries or drive on foreign roads using our state driver's licenses; could not have access to a foreign consular official if we are arrested abroad; could not have our children returned if abducted by a parent; and could not prevent foreign ships from polluting our waters."

While mandates for building a border wall, boosting immigration law enforcement and barring refugees will take immediate effect, others buy time by establishing committees and reviews.

The draft Pentagon order begins by stating, “It shall be the policy of the United States to pursue Peace Through Strength.” It directs Defense Secretary James Mattis to produce a National Defense Strategy — something virtually every administration regularly does — by the beginning of 2018.

There is little apparent controversy in **the draft executive order to strengthen cybersecurity**, a six-page document that in tone and substance could have been written by the Obama administration. It calls for no bold initiatives but rather for review of areas Trump’s predecessor had already scrutinized.

[Read the draft of the executive order on cybersecurity]

One line in the proposed order appeared to signal that the new administration might want to reorganize agencies or boost legal authorities to better protect the country’s civilian government networks and critical infrastructure.

Even as Trump sets direction with executive orders, the White House is trying to exert direct control over policymaking at federal departments and agencies. Although offices in many departments sit empty as Cabinet nominees await confirmation, and sub-Cabinet positions are not yet filled, senior advisers have been deployed from the West Wing as liaisons to some departments, to ensure the work that is being done is in keeping with White House priorities.

Of the suggestion that at least some of Trump’s moves so far may be largely symbolic and eventual policies could become more traditional, Schake said, “Oh my God, that’s the hopeful interpretation — that he’s trying to take rapid symbolic gestures that will please his base and that the policy details can get worked out subsequently when he has a Cabinet in place.”

“The downside, of course, is it brings all of the diplomatic and economic downsides of having taken the policy action, even if it’s only a symbolic gesture,” she said.