

U.S. military personnel and our Japanese allies. This regime is a significant threat—the North Korean regime. It is a threat exacerbated by reckless ridicule, bombastic statements, and ill-considered tweets. One miscalculation can be disastrous. The administration should accelerate serious, sober diplomacy in lockstep with our allies. For the New Year, let's agree to a new rule for all of us—both branches of government: Leave the tweets for domestic policy only. Sound foreign policy and security policy cannot be done in 280 characters.

Congress has offered the administration powerful leverage in this circumstance in the form of several pieces of legislation. First, the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act passed this summer, and the Banking Restrictions Involving North Korea Act is pending before the Senate now. I support these tough, bipartisan sanctions measures because I believe turning the economic screws, coupled with genuine diplomacy, can yield results. In the New Year, I urge the President to tone down the rhetoric and to empower the Secretary of State and our senior diplomats to find a diplomatic path toward a stable North Korea that doesn't threaten the United States or our allies.

How about terrorist groups around the world? Over the last 16 years, the U.S. military, the intelligence community, and our homeland security professionals have worked hand in hand to meet the rise of terrorist groups head on. We owe the men and women in uniform a debt of gratitude for tirelessly leading the coalition fight that has rolled back ISIS's territorial gains. Implementing the administration's new strategy and its call to fight terrorism at its source is not just about the military fight. The United States should also lead the international community in addressing the underlying issues that drive terrorist recruitment and help to rebuild communities newly liberated from terrorist control.

Think about this. More than 65 million people around the world are displaced from their homes right now. There is no purely military solution for this refugee crisis. A successful counterterrorism strategy requires us to work with our partners for information sharing and for contributions of development assistance.

Another trouble spot in the world is Syria. In Syria, the connection between instability, displacement, and terrorism is clear. This conflict has been raging for nearly 7 years. In the absence of U.S. engagement on a political solution to this crisis, regional powers—namely, Russia, Iran, and Turkey—have run the table, to the benefit of the murderous Assad regime and at the expense of the Syrian people. The United States has abdicated its leadership role and ceded control of the outcomes to nations with interests often in direct conflict with our own.

Recently, we learned that the administration will endorse a political tran-

sition plan that leaves Bashar al-Assad in power for at least another 4 years. This is unacceptable and dangerous. Assad is responsible for terrible war crimes that led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Syrians and the displacement of millions more. The strategy outlined by the administration says: “We will seek a settlement to the Syrian civil war that sets the conditions for refugees to return home and rebuild their lives and safety.”

I agree with that goal. Most people would agree with that goal, but the administration has missed the bigger picture. We need a strategy that pushes back on Russian and Iranian influence in Syria and addresses the underlying grievances that led to the conflict in the first place.

Let me move to Iran. The Iranian regime remains a powerful force for instability in the Middle East, especially through its support of terrorist proxies and militias. We know that the Iranians want to maintain control of territory linking Tehran with Beirut. So they will continue to act against U.S. interests in Iraq and Syria. Here, again, Congress has offered powerful tools to the administration in the form of the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act.

The nuclear deal with Iran is giving us an unprecedented visibility on the Iranian nuclear program, but the multilateral diplomatic channels built alongside that agreement have atrophied under this administration. Every time the President threatens to walk away from the Iran nuclear deal, he sends a clear signal to our allies and adversaries alike: U.S. commitments are written in disappearing ink.

If the administration wants to get tough on Iran's nonnuclear bad behavior, there are concrete steps to take today:

No. 1, work with our allies to step up maritime interdictions of any illicit weapons traffic to or from Iran.

No. 2, push the Europeans to do more to combat the financial networks that enrich the Iranian terrorist proxy, Hezbollah. My bipartisan Stop Terrorist Operational Resources and Money Act, or the so-called STORM Act, which is bipartisan, could help with that.

No. 3, begin diplomatic conversations with our allies about a multilateral strategy to curtail the Iranian ballistic missile program.

All of these efforts take cooperation with our allies, which the President makes harder every time he calls into question the future of the nuclear deal, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action.

Finally, as to Russia and China, the new strategy by this administration repeatedly describes Russia and China as our competitors. Let me be clear. These countries are not our friends. They actively work against U.S. interests. They are threatened by American military dominance and economic power, and both are trying to game the system to undermine our advantages.

China systemically, perniciously games the international trade system to its advantage. I firmly believe American workers and industry can outinnovate and outproduce any others in the world when the playing field is level. Driven by similar motives, Russia has meddled in elections across the Western world, trying to undermine confidence in one of our most fundamental institutions of democracy. Again, there are concrete steps the administration can take to counter these threats from both China and Russia: No. 1, shore up our electoral systems and help others do the same; No. 2, counter propaganda; No. 3, fight corruption; and No. 4, get serious about holding trade cheaters like China accountable.

Through engagement and cooperation, we can lead the rest of the world away from the Cold War-era clash of major powers that Russia and China want to create.

In conclusion, if this outline of some of the threats and challenges posed seems like a tremendous challenge—a great challenge for our Nation—it is because it always has been so. It has always been a challenge.

President Truman once said:

America was not built on fear. America was built on courage, on imagination and on unbeatable determination to do the job at hand.

When faced with a challenge, whether it is Pennsylvanians or Americans, we don't shrink inward. We step up. Our adversaries want us to be divided and dispirited. These adversaries underestimate the courage, the imagination, and the determination of the American people.

President Trump might see it differently, but as we close out 2017, I see a world that needs American leadership more than ever. To paraphrase President Kennedy, we should seek not a Pax Americana enforced on the world by American weapons of war but a genuine peace that makes life on Earth worth living. The American people are ready to rise to that challenge. I hope the administration is too.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. SULLIVAN). The majority whip.

SENATE ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Mr. CORNYN. Mr. President, I would like to speak briefly today about the year we have had here in Washington, DC.

At times along the way, it wasn't easy. There were more than one or two bumps in the road, and there were times when we got discouraged because we weren't able to accomplish everything we wanted to accomplish on the part of the American people. But looking back, I am proud of what we were able to get done.

The first thing is to notice the speed with which President Trump was able to nominate and we were able to confirm Federal judges. Everyone remembers last January when President

Trump nominated Neil Gorsuch to the U.S. Supreme Court. This was an excellent choice. He is an experienced Federal judge and accomplished scholar who understands the proper role of a judge under our Constitution.

I think the weather and my sinuses are not cooperating here at this moment.

I will be back later.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. ISAKSON. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

VETERANS HEALTHCARE

Mr. ISAKSON. Mr. President, I am glad to join my colleague Senator TESTER from Montana on the floor for a discussion of our Veterans' Affairs, our accomplishments over the last 3 years and our challenges for the future.

I want to start out my part of the conversation by saying this. Three years ago, the Veterans' Administration was making big headlines. Those headlines were that they weren't working well, our veterans were waiting too long for care, there were failures in our system throughout, and people were looking for an alternative to the VA system because it was in such a quagmire. Thanks to the work of our committee, which the Presiding Officer today is one of those members, we set out to fix a lot of the problems. No. 1 was the hospital in Denver, which is 40 percent finished. It was 3 years behind, and we closed in. That hospital is open today and operating because the Veterans' Affairs Committee of the Senate buckled its shoes, got to work, got the VA fixed, and got the hospital finished.

The most challenging thing we faced were long wait times for appointments for our veterans and veterans' services for healthcare. It was longer than 30 days just for a routine appointment, sometimes being as long as 6 months to wait, and sometimes they were dying before they got called up from the waiting list, which happened in the Arizona case in Phoenix.

We had some tragic stories that came through. Our committee came together and said: We are going to fix this. We are going to put our shoulders to the grindstone, we are going to work out hard, and we are going to make it happen. Like always, fixing anything requires one element, and that is hard work.

This Committee has worked hard—Democrats and Republicans alike. They have been willing to get the new Secretary, Secretary Shulkin, confirmed. To all of his aides—Tom Bowman, who has been a great aide to our committee for a long time, and now is a direct aide to the Secretary. The committee has asked: What is it we need to do to get it fixed?

We started out this year with 11 bills introduced for the Veterans' Administration improvements in terms of healthcare. Ten of those eleven have passed. There is one left. We are going to have a perfect 11-for-11 year, if we get the votes before the end of this year, we get the CARE bill passed for our veterans, but even if that doesn't make it, we have dealt with long waiting lines for determination of benefits for the VA. Those long waiting lines are beginning to dissipate.

We don't have hospitals being shut down because they can't be finished. We have CBOCs being opened because they are being finished. We don't have near as many cases of horror stories in a VA health facility because the facilities are being run better.

Do we have problems? Sure, we have problems. Anytime you have the second largest agency of the Federal Government—which the VA health system is—you are going to have problems, but we are meeting them head-on. We are not running away from them. We have a Secretary who is really willing to work to make it happen.

I cannot say enough about Secretary Shulkin. He has been fantastic. He has been a great worker. He has given President Trump the message, in terms of what our veterans need, the challenge that we need from the White House to join us, and the White House has substantially done so, to help make a lot of improvements.

Working with our ranking member, we decided we would do a number of things: We would end the long wait times for determination of disability, and we have done that. That is in process. We wanted to see to it that the modern access to healthcare was available to all of our veterans, one way or another. We wanted to make sure we came up with creative ideas by using telemedicine and other techniques to deliver healthcare to our veterans.

Most importantly, we knew the Choice Act we passed 3 years ago, led by Senator McCAIN—who is in our prayers and thoughts every day. I might add from the floor of the Senate today, we wish him the very best if he is listening. Senator McCAIN went to work and came up with the first aspect of Choice, which passed 3 years ago. I was on the conference committee. We had this crazy idea that we were going to let veterans choose where they want to go for their healthcare. We set up the system to do that. The system worked pretty well in some cases. Senator TESTER will say in rural America it didn't work all that well, in some cases, but it was a good effort of ours to take the private sector in America and make it a force multiplier for the healthcare services delivered to our veterans and expand the access of healthcare to our vets.

Well, now we have before the Senate what we call the Care Act. It is the finishing touches of what was originally in the Choice Act. We are taking the things we learned and repealing what

was wrong. We are taking things we learned are right, and we are enhancing them. I hope every Member of the Senate who can hear my voice today will join me sometime in the next few weeks ahead to finish the job and pass the Care Act. Our committee passed it out 14 to 1, with Democrats and Republicans alike, shoulder to shoulder, voting for it. It is the right thing to do for our vets. We are hopefully going to do the same thing on the floor.

The Care Act does a lot of amazing things, but it takes what we have learned in 3 years and applies it to the real world for our veterans. It says a veteran has a choice for his healthcare, public or private, VA or private sector. The veteran and his or her doctor may determine where they want to go. The physician providing the services who is outside the system will cooperate with the VA, so we have good medical records for that veteran, and they will work together to choose doctors who have the quality, the reputation, and the ability to deliver the service, whether they are in the VA or outside the VA.

The veteran comes first in Veterans Choice. In the Caring for Our Veterans Act, the veteran comes first, not Members of the Senate, not employees of the VA. The veteran comes first, which is what we need to do.

I hope everyone will join Senator TESTER and me in seeing to it, when we get this to the floor—and we are trying every day—that they join us in helping pass the Care Act.

One last thing I want to mention about the Care Act is it also contains the funding necessary to complete the year for the Veterans' Administration in terms of health services. More importantly, it consolidates the stovepipes of funding in the VA so we no longer have this Mickey Mouse game, which we have all experienced for the last 5 or 6 years, where the VA is always running out of money.

The Congress has never cut off the VA. When we had the biggest shutdown 5 or 6 years ago—or potential shutdown for the government that we had, we passed bills that exempted the VA to demonstrate long and hard that we would never leave our veterans in need of healthcare coverage waiting because we couldn't act in the Congress, and that would happen today if that was threatening us.

I want to underline, this is not a matter of anybody threatening anybody. This is a matter of finishing the job for our veterans and seeing to it that the Veterans' Administration has the resources necessary to deliver the services to our veterans.

For those who can hear this plea—and it is a plea—understand I am coming before us today to say three things: One is thank you. Thank you to every Member of the Senate who voted with us to get us where we are today. We have passed 10 of the 11 bills we brought in this year for veterans' healthcare services. Thank you very much.