

Donald Trump**Trump targets tax reform to reconnect with Republicans**

John Kelly leading efforts to restore order at White House



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YESTERDAY by: Shawn Donnan in Washington

The Trump administration has decided to push hard for tax reform and dial down a controversial national security investigation into steel imports in a bid to swing Republican support behind the president after the turmoil of recent weeks, according to senior officials.

They said that former marine general John Kelly, the new chief of staff, was leading efforts to restore order to the White House and reassure Republican leaders alarmed by Mr Trump's equivocal reaction to white nationalist-fuelled violence in Virginia last week and the subsequent open criticism from business leaders.

Past efforts to bring order to the Trump administration and its policymaking have struggled largely because of the president's propensity to derail plans with a single riff on Twitter.

But senior people within the White House insisted that the exit last week of Steve Bannon, Mr Trump's chief strategist and architect of his nationalist economic stance, cleared the way for a more streamlined policy process.

These officials said they were determined to record quick wins in the weeks ahead, with tax reform seen as the best candidate to score what would be the president's first major legislative gain and repair relations with the business community.

Mr Trump will also address the nation on Monday night to lay out his new Afghan strategy after months of wrangling over how best to tackle America's longest-running war.

Officials said they were keen to emphasise elements of the president's economic agenda that have broader support from US business and in Congress, such as the launch last week of an investigation into Chinese intellectual property theft.

Among the president's more contentious proposals set to be sidelined were the national security investigation into steel, which Mr Bannon and other economic nationalists within the administration had been pushing with a view to action against cheap imports.

A commerce department report is now circulating between agencies. But senior officials said it was likely to stall because of opposition from the business community and Republicans in Congress concerned that it would hit steel users and the broader economy.

A new NBC/Marist poll released on Sunday showed that Mr Trump was losing support in some of the key industrial swing states that drove him to victory last November with his approval rating falling below 40 per cent in Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin.

Despite what some within the administration described as a "moral conflict" in the wake of the president's reaction to the Charlottesville violence, which saw him put neo-Nazis on the same moral plane as counter-protesters, senior figures within the administration have rallied around him.

In a letter addressed to fellow Yale alumni who had called on him to resign, Stephen Mnuchin, treasury secretary, said at the weekend that he was determined to press ahead with the president's agenda.

"I don't believe the allegations against the president are accurate, and I believe that having highly talented men and women in our country surrounding the president in his administration should be reassuring to you and all the American people," he wrote.

Gary Hufbauer of the Peterson Institute for International Economics, a think-tank, said the Trump administration's push for tax reform was likely to see it play down the more radical elements of its trade agenda in the months to come, including the "economic war" with China that Mr Bannon had been advocating.

"I don't think beating the drums on China helps at all on the tax bill," Mr Hufbauer said. "Trade is just a distraction from the tax agenda. It takes a lot of time and it aggravates a lot of constituents who you need to help on the tax agenda."