

Global Security Briefing – April 2017

Trump, North Korea and the Risk of War

Paul Rogers

Summary

April has seen the inexperienced Trump Administration further escalate US military activities from Iraq and Syria to Afghanistan and Yemen. Attacking Syrian regime targets for the first time sent a clear signal of muscular change from the Obama era and suggested to President Trump a means to reverse his negative domestic approval ratings. However, it is the crisis over North Korea's nuclear missile programme that has the greatest potential to escalate suddenly and disastrously into a conflict of global significance.

Introduction

Last month's briefing, [Sustainable Security in the Trump Era](#), discussed the outlook for the sustainable security approach in terms of the incoming Trump administration, concluding that in all three major areas of concern - economic, environmental and military - the Trump prospect was not positive. It would maintain a highly sceptical approach to climate change even if it might end up getting left behind technologically and economically, and its economic policies would do nothing to reduce the widening wealth/poverty inequalities that cleave American society.

In terms of US security policy, the indications after two months in office were that Trump would expand the military budget and armed forces, give military commanders greater freedom of action, was willing to support an expanded global military posture and saw this as integral to "making America great again". This briefing continues the overall theme in relation to the military outlook, the main emphasis being on the potential for a crisis involving North Korea.

The Military Posture

The March briefing identified a number of areas where the military posture was being expanded. These included an increased use of air power in supporting Iraqi troops attempting to take control of Mosul, the expanded use of Special Forces in Yemen, more powers for US forces to initiate action against militias in Somalia, and the deployment of additional ground troops to Iraq. In the past month there have been further indications of a military expansion.

- In Iraq, the use of air power in Mosul has increased still further, although the so-called Islamic State (IS) remains entrenched in the western heart of the city.

- In northern Syria, the US Air Force has been establishing an [airfield](#) between Kobane and Raqqa to support the looming offensive against this other stronghold of IS. Up to 1,000 more US troops are [anticipated](#) to join the 950 US Special Forces, Rangers and Marines already bolstering the mainly Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces militia for this offensive.
- In western Syria, the US Navy carried out a major sea-launched cruise missile raid on an Assad-regime air base in response to a suspected government attack on rebel-held Khan Sheikhoun that used chemical agents and killed many civilians.
- In Yemen there have been 85 armed drone and strike aircraft attacks since President Trump's inauguration, more than President Obama approved in 2015 and 2016 combined.
- In Afghanistan the US Air Force used the world's most powerful conventional bomb, the GBU-43/B Massive Ordnance Air Burst (MOAB), for the first time against an IS faction.
- Also in Afghanistan, Trump's National Security Advisor, General H R McMaster, arrived on a surprise visit that coincided with the deployment of several hundred US Marines to bolster the Afghan National Army, which was suffering increasing losses from attacks by Taliban and other armed opposition groups. There were calls for a further major increase in US military forces in the country at the start of the so-called "fighting season".
- Reports at the end of the month that the Trump administration has decided to hand more authority to the Pentagon in terms of how it conducts the wars in Iraq and Syria.
- Trump diverted a 'powerful armada', including a carrier battle group and a nuclear submarine, towards North East Asia and says he fears a "major, major conflict" with North Korea.

It is in this context that the burgeoning crisis with North Korea requires specific analysis.

A Crisis out of Nowhere?

During the course of the past month the issue of North Korea's nuclear and missile development programmes has come to the fore for reasons which are not easy to pinpoint. It is true that there have been some additional tests of steadily more advanced missiles (one of which failed completely) and there is a possibility that a new nuclear test is being readied. Beyond this, though, little has changed on the North Korean side, and it is the Trump administration that has started to rethink policy, with this stemming from two factors.

One, as already mentioned, is that Trump's attitude to security is to focus far more on the use of military force and far less on diplomacy, in marked contrast to the Obama administration. In a sense this harks back to the George W Bush administration after the

9/11 attacks and the subsequent termination of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. In his January 2002 *State of the Union Address* to Congress, Bush extended the war against al-Qaida and the Taliban to a conflict with the “axis of evil” centred on Iraq, Iran and North Korea. In the past 15 years, the Iraqi regime of Saddam Hussein has been terminated and the Trump White House is taking a harsh line over the recent Iran nuclear deal. This leaves North Korea and it is here that the second factor comes into play.

Until a few months ago, US policy was to use sanctions and diplomacy in dealing with North Korea, not least in collaboration with China as the one state with serious influence over Pyongyang. This was based on an assessment that North Korea’s progress towards a functioning nuclear force capable of targeting the United States was still quite a few years off.

There are credible reports that recent US intelligence analysis indicates that this is no longer the case and, specifically, that North Korea is progressing to the point where it could produce seven or eight nuclear weapons each year, compared with the previous assumption of one a year. It is also believed to be having success in shrinking the size and weight of warheads so that they can be carried by long-range missiles and that it is within a very few years of producing reliable intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) that could reach the United States. On a worst case assessment the belief is that North Korea might have up to 40 nuclear weapons by the end of President Trump’s first term, as well as being able to deploy the first of a number of ICBMs.

The extent to which this is an exaggeration is simply not clear but that is not entirely relevant since President Trump and his advisors believe that the time to act is now. As he put it a few days ago: “People put blindfolds on for decades, and now it’s time to solve the problem”. This is because the worst case assessment is very much dependent on a very intensive programme of testing of missiles and of warheads and without this the progress of North Korea’s whole nuclear programme will be hugely limited.

How to Act

At the time of writing (28 April) the approach of the Trump administration appears still to be one of seeking much tougher sanctions in order to change the policies of the North Korean regime, but these will have minimal effect without severe sanctions on North Korea’s ability to import fuel. Since China is the dominant supplier, cooperation between Washington and Beijing has to be forthcoming but there are both generic and specific reasons why Beijing is not too sympathetic to putting further pressure on North Korea. The first are that any action which precipitates a collapse of the regime could lead to a war of survival by the regime, including the risk of nuclear use, it would certainly lead to a huge influx of refugees into China and even if the regime collapsed without social catastrophe, the prospect of a unified pro-Western regime on its borders does not appeal to Beijing.

The specific reasons revolve around the manner in which the United States is using its military power in the expectation that the Pyongyang regime will change its policies, and there is a particular concern that the radar linked to the Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) anti-missile system now being deployed in South Korea has the capacity to gain considerable intelligence on some of China's key defence capabilities.

China is also likely to be far more aware of the psychology of the North Korean regime and the way it sees its nuclear force as essential to state survival. Like some other states, it is only too well aware that not long after Gaddafi's Libya gave up its WMD programme the regime was terminated with considerable NATO military support.

In short, rapid action to effect a change in North Korea's nuclear and missile plans has no chance of success – only longer-term careful diplomatic action may work. If not, then China, the United States and others will have to get used to the idea that a nuclear-armed North Korea will be a feature of the security of the region. It is worth noting that some leading Western military figures from the Cold War era that had experienced the dangers of the East-West nuclear confrontation ended their careers supporting the idea of global nuclear disarmament. That opportunity was lost and the world may have to get used to the consequences, at least in the case of North Korea.

Conclusion

Such a prospect, though, will not appeal to the Trump White House, and given that his administration is already putting far more emphasis on military thinking and options, there really is a risk that in the coming months the decision may be taken to undertake pre-emptive military action against North Korea's warhead and missile production facilities. This is a highly unwelcome and potentially disastrous prospect but Trump has said that North Korea has to curb its ambitions. In effect he has drawn a red line and, since he criticised Mr Obama for doing so over Syrian chemical weapons and then failing to carry out his threat, President Trump may feel he can hardly afford the opprobrium that would follow should he fail to respond in this case.

Moreover, this has a particular relevance for the UK, where the Foreign Secretary, Boris Johnson, has said that the UK would support further US action in Syria. With the Royal Air Force having conducted its first ever [exercises](#) with South Korean and US counterparts in Korea last November, this raises the issue of whether the same would apply in the case of North Korea, an interesting question at the start of a general election campaign.

About the Author

Paul Rogers is Global Security Consultant to Oxford Research Group and Professor of Peace Studies at the University of Bradford. His [‘Monthly Global Security Briefings’](#) are available from our website. His new book *Irregular War: ISIS and the New Threats from the Margins* will be published by I B Tauris in June 2016. These briefings are circulated free of charge for non-profit use, but please **consider making a donation to ORG**, if you are able to do so.

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