



The Limits of US Military Power

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Summary

President Trump has responded to the emerging challenges to the United States' power from Iran and North Korea with baleful talk of military action. These threats have achieved little. What does this situation tell us about the limits of America's military power?

Introduction

The United States engaged in many military interventions after 9/11 and the largest, in Afghanistan and Iraq, continue in different forms even though they were scaled down two years into the Obama administration. Neither is complete even now and US engagements have been maintained at a substantial level if relying more on [remote warfare](#) methods than on large numbers of deployed troops. Donald Trump came to power vowing both to bring more US troops home but also making it clear that the United States would remain the world's pre-eminent state even if reluctant to engage in new military endeavours.

With two of the major challenges to US power, North Korea and Iran, the Trump administration has been firm in demanding comprehensive changes in regime policies and has been willing to threaten the use of substantial force. So far, the results have been very poor, but the administration is currently in some difficulty with the re-election campaign soon to get under way. It needs progress but does not want to be engaged in a war in either theatre. This briefing explores whether this is a temporary condition or has a more general implication for limits to US military power.

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After 9/11

The George W Bush administration responded to the appalling 9/11 atrocities with vigorous military action to terminate the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and destroy the al-Qaida movement's presence in that country. It initially succeeded in both aims and just over a year later it moved on to terminate the Iraqi regime of Saddam Hussein which was seen as the most immediate threat to US security as a member of the axis of evil (Iraq, Iran and North Korea).

That, too, seemed successful but in both countries protracted insurgencies developed, first in Iraq and then more slowly in Afghanistan. By the start of President Obama's first term in 2009, Iraq was seen as a bad war with US involvement to be scaled down radically whereas Afghanistan was seen as a fight worth continuing, given its relationship to the original 9/11 attacks. By 2011, the United States had largely withdrawn from Iraq but later returned to lead a coalition fighting an intense air war against the new threat from the Islamic State. A troop surge in Afghanistan in 2010-11 was designed to force the Taliban insurgents to the negotiating table but failed, with Obama subsequently withdrawing all but 14,000 troops of the 100,000 that had been stationed there.

Also, during the last three years of Obama's second term the United States was involved in ending the Gaddafi regime in Libya with its disastrous security consequences for the country, while continuing to fight Islamist paramilitaries in Yemen, Somalia and across the Sahel region of West and Central Africa. Following the 2016 election campaign, the incoming Trump administration focused on "making America great again" concentrating on internal political and economic policies while also aiming to bring US troops back home. This latter element was an important part of Trump's presidential campaign but was

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also influenced by his strong personal antipathy to almost all of Obama's policies, both domestic and international.

The Trump approach

Trump inherited a violent stalemate in Afghanistan and has sought to negotiate a peace deal with the Taliban, the main political requirement being domestic – the need to bring the war to an end before mid-2020 and the peak of his re-election campaign. Until early September this looked possible even if it might leave the elected Afghan government to face a Taliban movement intent on having a major governance role. That seemed less important to Trump than bringing the troops home, but in spite of this aim the negotiations have so far failed to lead to a settlement. They have, in any case, been overshadowed by events in North Korea and Iran.

North Korea

The basic requirement for the Trump administration has been to prevent the Kim Jong-Un regime from developing and deploying nuclear weapons and viable delivery systems, the latter being able to threaten the United States. The stated “red line” for the administration is that North Korea must on no account be able to develop nuclear-armed intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM) that can reach the continental United States.

The North Koreans have seen the urgent need to develop precisely such a force but have also been very keen to get relief from the current sanctions regime. Two summit meetings have been held and these have led to a welcome reduction in tensions, but neither side has given way, even if there has been a modest degree of military disengagement.

Meanwhile, the Pyongyang regime has quietly continued to develop its ballistic missile programme while avoiding further tests of the intercontinental variant. There is also evidence that it has been producing further nuclear warheads, the effect of these two developments being that in the run-up to next year's presidential election the regime will be able to claim that it has the means to deter the United States from attacking it. The risk for President Trump, the great deal maker, is that his opponents can claim that the great dealmaker has himself been "out-dealed".

Whether North Korea could actually threaten the United States in the event of a severe crisis is not certain. The development of a new ICBM, even if based on shorter-range missiles, normally involves numerous tests over several years, whereas there have been few actual tests of the North Korea system. The problem is that much can be achieved without full-range testing and North Korea has persisted with work, including tests, of related missiles of lesser range. Again, in the event of a major crisis the United States might be able to stage sufficient pre-emptive military strikes to cripple the North Korean capacity to launch long range missiles but this would risk an appalling escalation of conventional warfare, putting many millions of South Korean lives at risk, not least in view of the location of South Korean cities close to the North Korean border.

Under normal circumstances Mr Trump could counter the political risk arising from this stalemate by another summit that gives an appearance of progress but in the heat of an election campaign this would be difficult if not impossible. His alternative would be to make some major concessions to the Pyongyang regime on the issue of sanctions which would ensure that the regime did in turn make some serious concessions. This would certainly be welcome in dealing

with a regime with a terrible human rights record, but even this would be used by political opponents to criticise his failure to bring the regime to book. The bottom line for Trump is that there is not a realistic military solution to the issue, whatever the bluster and threats.

Iran

A subsidiary yet important aim of the Iraq War in 2003 was to see the country make the transition to a pro-western state, thereby limiting Iranian influence across the region. This was a complete failure as the war had the opposite effect, with the post-war Shi'a-majority government moving far closer to Tehran than the Saddam Hussein regime. By 2010 it was clear that the Iranian leadership was hugely concerned at the risk of intervention by the United States but engaged with the Obama administration to agree the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) which would severely limit Iran's ability to develop nuclear weapons in return for an easing of economic and other sanctions. As well as Iran and the United States, the JCPOA comprised Russia, China, the UK, France and Germany, but President Trump withdrew from the agreement in May 2018 primarily on the grounds that it was inadequate in terms of timescale, limits to missile activity and control of Iran's Middle East expansionism.

In response to the US action by mid-2019 Iran began to exceed some of the margins of the treaty and tensions escalated to the indirect and direct use of paramilitary and military tactics against US and Saudi interests. Trump threatened war but to little effect and early this month Iran succeeded in engineering a substantial armed drone attack on the massive Abqaiq oil processing plant east of Riyadh, exposing severe limitations in the Saudi air defence system. The United States responded with further threats but in

practical terms began to station uniformed military personnel in the Kingdom for the first time in fifteen years to improve the air defences.

While the US military presence is currently small the symbolism of stationing what extreme Islamist paramilitaries describe as “Crusader” forces to protect the House of Saud, the Guardian of the Two Holy Places, is regarded as anathema and causes wide concern across Saudi Arabia. No doubt this is welcome in Tehran. More generally, the damage to the Abqaiq plant may be readily repairable but it demonstrates powerfully the vulnerability of Saudi Arabia, not least its petrochemical and desalination plants, to remote warfare.

The problem for the United States is that military action against Iran to end this threat would have to be substantial and long-term, inevitably tying down large US forces in the region and running directly against Trump’s campaigning stance. A preferable approach would be to recognise the serious problems of a potential war with Iran and to opt for a negotiated re-appraisal of the [JCPOA](#), offering some concessions on sanctions in order to start the process.

Conclusion

President Trump’s style is frequently bombastic, with vivid threats of extreme military action, but with both North Korea and Iran the potential for such action is severely limited if not excessively dangerous. He may also present himself as the great dealmaker, but if making deals is based on unsustainable threats rather than concessions then they are little short of meaningless.

In normal circumstances it might be possible to find a middle way and for the parties to develop a series of minor confidence-building measures as a prelude to negotiations, but two factors stand in the way. One is that there are two

issues to be handled at the same time, North Korea and Iran, with each impacting on the other. The second is that we are entering a period of pre-election tension in the United States which militates against calm good sense. It therefore behoves allies of President Trump, especially in Europe, to do all they can to ensure that calm does prevail, no easy task but the stakes are potentially very high.

Image credit: US Air Force.

About the Author

Paul Rogers is Oxford Research Group's Senior Fellow in international security and Professor of Peace Studies at the University of Bradford. His '**Monthly Global Security Briefings**' are available from our website. His latest book *Irregular War: ISIS and the New Threats from the Margins* was published by I B Tauris in June 2016.

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