

# The Trump Administration and Nuclear Dangers

By *Barry M. Blechman*

## Resumé

President Trump's lättvindiga retorik kring kärnvapnen och dessas användning väcker oro. Hans syn på dessa frågor skiljer sig markant från de som har mandat att faktiskt verkställa politiken. Dock, i praktiken har det hittills handlat om okontroversiella och riskminskande åtgärder. Trots det så är USA inbladat i reala samt eventuella konflikt världen över. Några av dessa skulle kunna resultera i insatsen av nukleära stridsmedel. Beträffande den största riskfaktorn, Nord Korea, är det tveksamt om Trump's "morot och klubba" strategi kommer att fungera, och det finns heller inga tydliga lösningar som den nuvarande eller en framtida administration i USA kan acceptera. Användandet av Kärnvapen framförs också som en option vid en konflikt med Ryssland. Det är för tidigt att bedöma, men det verkar som om pragmatiska inflytelser skulle dominera över Trump's diplomati. I fallet Iran har presidenten i princip hänvisat beslutet till Kongressen, som högst osannolikt kommer att agera provocerande. Och trots potential för en nukleär konflikt med USA så har Kina visat sig återhållsamt så länge inte Japan utvecklar egen kärnvapenförmåga. Avslutningsvis, utgör det pågående Nuclear Posture Review den största faran om detta leder till en lägre tröskel och ökad nukleär förmåga.

GIVEN HIS MANY casual and ill-informed references to nuclear weapons and their potential use, concerns have been raised in the United States and other nations about the nuclear risks posed by advent of the Trump Administration. To understand, these dangers, it is essential to first understand the broad strands of what seem like contradictory U.S. foreign and security policies, and then turn to specific risks.

## U.S. Foreign Policy

For the past year, U.S. foreign policy has alternated between a jingoistic, isolationist nationalism and a mainstream, conservative globalism. At times, both strands have been expressed simultaneously with respect to different issues. If U.S. policy seems incoherent, it is. The reason is that the president's views

differ markedly from those who are charged with actually implementing policy.

The President's international perspectives are essentially those of Steve Bannon, the executive who joined the president's campaign from the Breitbart News Service and, after a brief stint in the White House when it appeared that he would be a central player on national security matters, to which he has now returned. Bannon, a leader of the "Alt-right" movement, espouses an "America First" policy, a view which the President seems to share. In actuality, the policy should be called "White America First," as it takes a racist view of the world and of the United States.

- Among the determinants of this policy are a distrust of all things foreign, including allies, whom the President seems to believe are free-loaders, with only a few exceptions.

The policy is also based on a distrust of trading partners, whom the President sees as he would business competitors, people and countries determined to take advantage of the United States whenever possible. Those that share this world view have a particular distrust of people from Islamic countries, all of whom they believe are potential jihadists, as well as people from Latin America, all of whom are potential gang members and drug smugglers.

- A second tenet of the policy is a belief that national security depends strictly on military power. The believers, especially the President, over-estimate the effectiveness of military power – particularly when the armed forces are led by individuals they consider tough-minded. They hold this belief despite the repeated demonstrations during the 21<sup>st</sup> Century of the inability of military power to solve most international problems. Adherents of this policy also believe that it is possible to coerce potential foes (and friends) through tough talk and military threats – and they have held to this belief despite the failure to date of such postures to solve problems ranging from North Korea to Ukraine. Of course, adherence to this public posture plays to the President’s political base, but it appears from the constancy of his repetitions that he truly believes in this approach.
- Conversely, the policy discounts the effectiveness of all other instruments of foreign policy, what is typically referred to as “soft power.” Diplomacy and the agreements that can result from diplomatic actions, such as the Iran Nuclear Agreement are scorned. The State Department budget is proposed to be cut by more than 30 percent with commensurate reductions in staff. More than a year after the election, dozens of ambassadorships have yet to be

filled, along with many key, senior positions in the Department. Economic instruments of power, including such coercive instruments as sanctions, are believed to be ineffective. And, of course, such things as nurturing political, social, and cultural relationships are believed to be naïve diversions from the “real stuff” of international politics. Particular contempt is reserved for international institutions, which are seen principally as fora in which the nations of the world gang up against the United States and its very few true allies.

Fortunately, the President cannot implement foreign policy single-handedly. Those around him during the campaign and in the first month or so of the administration seemed to reflect the mind-set just described. But, after this shaky start – including, for example, the appointments of General Flynn as national security advisor, Mr. Bannon as chief strategist, and Reince Priebus as chief of staff, the President has now appointed reasonable, knowledgeable, conservative professionals as the principal conduits to the foreign policy establishment. These include General James Mattis as secretary of defense, General John F. Kelly as chief of staff, and General H.R. McMaster as national security advisor. Moreover, the professional military leadership, beginning with the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Joseph Dunford, are realists; they have experienced the limits of military power virtually throughout their careers. In addition, the ranking civilian personnel and Foreign Service officers in key security departments tend to be experienced, knowledgeable, and professional. And, finally, on the whole, the political appointments made so far to the National Security Council staff and to the Department of Defense, as well as the few at the State Department, are reasonable and

knowledgeable people, people who pay attention to facts.

As a result, we have this two-level policy – the president’s “tweets” and verbal statements, on the one hand, and the statements and actions of those charged with implementing policy below him. It is an unfortunate situation, and leads often to incoherent policy, and sometimes to outright contradictions in the US position. But, in practice, the results so far have been an essentially mainstream, conservative, risk-adverse series of actions. I would note, for example, that when the President decided to retaliate militarily for Syria’s use of chemical weapons, he was presented with three options and he chose the minimal one – one which included warnings to Russia so that no Russians were killed and most of the Syrian aircraft had been evacuated from the base that was struck.

The Administration’s highest foreign priority is now, and will continue to be, the “war” against ISIS and all other violent Islamist organizations. All else will take second place. To win this “war,” military commanders have been given greater latitude to make decisions in the field and to conduct operations as they see fit. This has led to lesser concern for so-called “collateral” (civilian) casualties, but greater effectiveness against the enemy. To fight this war, the U.S. will depend most heavily on manned and unmanned air operations and on Special Forces on the ground. The latter will work primarily with local military forces, but sometimes they will conduct unilateral operations. The theater for this “war” stretches from East Asia, though Afghanistan/Pakistan, into Iraq/Syria/Yemen, and throughout North Africa and the Sahel.

## Nuclear Dangers

Obviously, a foreign policy that features bellicose language, threats, and military conflict implicitly suggests many risks. Even if specific actions taken so far generally have been risk-adverse, the U.S. is involved in real and potential confrontations throughout the world, some of which implicitly contain a risk of nuclear weapons use. The war against ISIS is an exception to this danger, but there are several areas of serious concern.

1. The greatest risk concerns North Korea. The president seems determined to show that unlike his three predecessors, he can coerce North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons or, at least, to stop its missile program short of demonstrating a capability to hit the US with a nuclear-armed missile.
- The President’s rhetoric and threats against North Korea, and repeated references to the existence of military options, seem to be aimed primarily at Beijing, rather than Pyongyang. They are intended to persuade Chinese leaders to take stronger actions to truly hurt the North Korean economy (and perhaps to find a means to bring about a change in North Korea’s leadership). There is no viable military option, of course, even if North Korea did not have nuclear weapons. Any conflict would lead to hundreds of thousands of South Korean casualties due to the North’s massed artillery within range of Seoul – some armed with chemical weapons. Use of nuclear weapons could raise the human toll into the millions. If there had been a viable military option, it seems likely that the George W. Bush Administration would have utilized it when the North Korean nuclear threat was reborn with Pyongyang’s withdrawal

from the Non-proliferation Treaty and first nuclear weapon test.

- The Administration, however, is coupling this "stick" approach with carrots for the Chinese. It has repeatedly delayed the financial and trade measures that would hurt China's economy, measures that the President had promised during the campaign. The President has also gone out of his way to praise China's leader Xi and to cultivate a personal relationship with him.
  - ▶ Can this policy work? It seems doubtful. The North Korean leader, Kim Jong-un, seems to believe that only a capability to strike the United States with nuclear weapons can ensure survivability of his regime. China has taken major steps to halt fuel imports and exports and to close North Korean businesses in China, but it has also multiplied food shipments to North Korea in order to avoid domestic unrest. Fear of domestic turmoil in the North will continue to constrain China's actions.
  - ▶ What is most likely to happen is that North Korea will continue its nuclear and missile programs and the US will learn to live with them, depending on deterrence to prevent nuclear attacks, just as we do with all other nuclear-armed adversaries. Strengthening our ability to deter the North and reassure Seoul might mean rebasing U.S. nuclear weapons in South Korea, depending on whether politics in that country would mean acceptance of such deployments.
  - ▶ In the meantime, the high rate of U.S. and South Korean military activity -- including bomber deployments, joint air and ground exercises, and significant naval demonstrations -- suggest considerable risks of accidental or inadvertent conflict.

In the most recent bomber deployment, B-52s flew further north along North Korea's airspace than they had in years. B-52s were used for this demonstration because unlike B-1s and B-2s, types of aircraft often used in these demonstrations, the B-52s carry weapons under their wings, and thus are exposed to viewing by the adversary. North Korea, of course, continues to conduct missile and nuclear weapon tests, as well as military exercises of its own. Given this situation, a conflict could occur due to an accident, or a misperception by one side or the other that an attack is beginning. And once hostilities occur, the risk of escalation to nuclear use would be frighteningly real.

- ▶ Is there a possible solution to the Korean problem? Yes, but this Administration will not take it, and perhaps no U.S. administration would be able to do it politically. The solution is to negotiate a peace agreement that recognizes the existence of two independent states on the Korean Peninsula. The agreement would include the verified elimination of all nuclear weapons and place limits on the size of the two states' armed forces. US troops would be removed as the agreement was implemented. And the Treaty would be guaranteed by the U.S., China, and possibly Russia. Once at peace, the two Korean states could develop peaceful economic and social ties and, perhaps, eventually unify. But much would have to happen in Pyongyang, Seoul, Beijing, and Washington for this idealistic route to peace to become a real possibility.
2. Conflicts with Russia also raise significant nuclear dangers. The President obviously has mixed feelings about Russia, but whatever plans he had before taking office for

bringing about improved relations clearly will not be coming to fruition any time soon. The Mueller investigation of possible ties between the Trump campaign and Russian attempts to influence the U.S. election will ensure the continuance of exiting sanctions on Russian entities and individuals and no serious negotiations for a new détente. Indeed, there is consensus within the US foreign policy establishment about the need to keep sanctions on Russia and, as feasible without provoking confrontation, to help Ukraine to get back on its feet and regain control in the east – or at least not to lose any more territory. This first requires that the government in Kiev clean up its own actions – and some progress appears to be made in that direction.

- The risk of confrontation with Russia appears to be lower now than in the past few years. Ironically, the president's foolish comments during the campaign and transition with regard to NATO no longer being a key element in US security policy created a backlash, causing every official and US legislator to reiterate the American commitment to the alliance and its central role in US foreign policy on every feasible occasion. As a result, the US commitment to NATO is stronger now than in many years. Moreover, because of Russia's massive military exercises simulating war on the territory of NATO's East European members, as well as its military provocations – particularly its overflights of European air space and deployments of nuclear-capable aircraft to North America and nuclear-capable missiles in Kaliningrad -- the US and NATO allies are finally acting to develop credible defensive capabilities in the Baltic states and elsewhere in Eastern Europe. These capabilities will strengthen

NATO's ability to deter any new Russian aggression.

- Of course, whenever opposing military forces are active in proximity to one another, there are the risks previously mentioned of accidents, misperceptions, and escalation. And, in this case, the risk of nuclear use would be quite high if a conflict rose to significant levels. The risk of nuclear use in a conflict between NATO and Russia is probably the second greatest nuclear danger.
  - An interesting question is what will happen to the NEW START agreement when it expires in 2021. Assuming there is not a radical change in US/Russia relations later in President Trump's term, the President will personally oppose any negotiations for an extension of the Treaty, reflecting his disapproval of negotiated limits on U.S. military power. This propensity will be buttressed in the Congress by evidence that Russia is cheating on the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty by developing and perhaps deploying a new ground-launched cruise missile. On the other hand, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Secretary of Defense will not want to get into a new quantitative strategic arms race with Russia, as the Department has many other priorities -- including expanding conventional forces, developing more advanced technologies, and completing the existing nuclear modernization program -- which will be competing for budgetary resources. Although it is too early to make a prediction, this may be a case in which the pragmatic policy-implementers will prevail over the President's distrust of diplomacy and negotiations.
3. A third nuclear danger is posed by Iran. The benefits of the 2016 Iran Nuclear

Agreement are obvious, even to many in the Congress who opposed the deal when it was concluded. In effect, in exchange for lifting certain economic and financial sanctions imposed on Iran by the UN Security Council, Iran agreed to stop producing fissile materials that could be used in nuclear weapons for ten years, as well as to many other restrictions on its nuclear infrastructure. Implementation of the agreement is monitored by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which has reported quarterly that Iran is in compliance with its obligations. The President denounced the agreement during his campaign and since taking office. His opposition seems part of his determination to reverse everything that was achieved by President Obama, as the virtues of the agreement are obvious to most observers. In October, however, the president announced that he could no longer certify that Iran was in compliance with the agreement. This passes the issue to the Congress, which can now choose to re-impose those U.S. sanctions that were lifted as part of the deal. Importantly, however, President Trump did not announce that the U.S. would not abide by the deal, as he did the Paris Climate Accord, but simply shifted the onus to the Congress to withdraw U.S. participation – if it chooses to do so.

- Will the Congress take that step? Personally, I think it is unlikely. Maintaining the freeze on Iran's weapon program is compelling enough; without it, we could soon see a second North Korean situation. There are also important economic interests at stake, such as the large number of Boeing civilian aircraft that Iran is negotiating to purchase.
- But I certainly could be wrong; the Congress has taken many irrational steps when it

comes to Iran. In that case, one of two scenarios would emerge. The most likely, I would guess, is that Iran and the rest of the world would ignore the U.S. and continue to abide by the terms of the agreement, just as the rest of world has done with respect to the U.S. withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement. TOTAL, the French energy company, for example, would be very happy not to have competition for rebuilding Iran's oil and gas sector, as will many other enterprises in Europe, Russia, and China.

- On the other hand, a second scenario could unfold. Hard-liners in Tehran could use the U.S. re-imposition of sanctions as justification to withdraw from the agreement and restart Iran's nuclear program. Forthcoming U.S. nuclear decisions might facilitate such an Iranian decision (see the section on the Nuclear Posture Review below). This would be the worst outcome, as Iran would probably be able to start building nuclear weapons within one or two years. Moreover, goaded by Israel, the Trump Administration would be tempted to prevent a nuclear Iran by striking its nuclear facilities which, in turn, could lead to a major conflagration in the Middle East.
- Quite apart from the nuclear deal, there are many other risks of US/Iranian conflict -- between our respective ground forces in Iraq and Syria, and between opposing air and naval forces on and around the Gulf. As in Korea, the presence of hostile forces in close proximity raises risks of accidents or misperceptions leading to armed conflict. With the exception of the second scenario described above, such a confrontation would be unlikely to contain a nuclear risk, however.

4. We also should consider the nuclear dangers resulting from ongoing disputes between China and the U.S. and its allies in East Asia. In fact, China puts less emphasis on nuclear capabilities than any of the other nuclear weapon states except, perhaps, the United Kingdom. This restraint has occurred despite the fact that China has been the recipient of more nuclear threats than any other country.<sup>1</sup> Despite these challenges, China had been willing to live with a nuclear capability that was vulnerable to a U.S. first strike for many decades; indeed, until this century. And, even now, when it is modernizing its nuclear arsenal, along with its conventional military forces, it is doing so at a measured pace and does not seem willing to invest the resources necessary to build up to large numbers of nuclear weapons, preferring to give higher priority to developing and fielding advanced conventional capabilities.
- There are, of course, several potential flash-points between the United States and China, deriving particularly from disputes in the East and South China seas between China and neighboring states, many of which are U.S. allies. Moreover, whenever the question of Taiwan's status is raised, tensions flare between the two countries, as resulted from President Trump's unwise phone call to the Taiwanese president soon after taking office. But China and the U.S. also have common interests that will discourage confrontation. The two economies are mutually dependent and they share a concern about future developments in Korea. Personally, I do not see a serious risk of conflict between the two, and certainly not a real risk of nuclear confrontation.
  - The only caveat to this judgement would be the possibility that, at some point, Japan might move to develop nuclear weapons.

Japan has the technical capabilities and materials to do so rapidly and, conceivably, it could get over its "nuclear allergy" in response to North Korea's weapons and threats, to say nothing of continuing conflicts with China over fishing rights and maritime resources in the East China Sea. Such a development would alter the political/military situation in East Asia with unpredictable results.

5. Finally, we should consider the risks raised by the ongoing Nuclear Posture Review (NPR). Legislation requires each new administration to conduct a review of US nuclear policies, doctrines, and forces. The Trump NPR has been underway for some time, is now in draft, and was presented to the President in September. It is expected to be released at the end of the year or early next year. What is it likely to contain?
- First, it is important to note that despite President's stated desire to increase US nuclear capabilities, there is not much room for growth. The number of U.S. strategic nuclear forces are constrained by the START Treaty, which entered into force in 2011 and will expire in 2021. Moreover, President Obama (that Nobel Peace Prize winner devoted to eliminating nuclear weapons) initiated an extraordinary modernization program that includes development of a new intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), a new strategic submarine and submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM), a new bomber and air-launched cruise missile with which it would be equipped, two new nuclear warheads, and a complete overhaul of the infrastructure that builds and maintains nuclear weapons. This far-ranging program is estimated to cost between \$1.2 and \$1.5 trillion over the next 30 years.

- But what else might the Trump Administration do to "strengthen" US nuclear capabilities? Several possibilities have been reported in the press. These include:
  - a. Authorize the development of a new, low-yield warhead, probably for deployment on SLBMs. This weapon would be intended to counter Russia's threats to utilize low-yield weapons on the battlefield if it were losing a conventional conflict. American nuclear ideologues maintain that the U.S. has to match the adversary's arsenal, weapon for weapon, yield for yield, or it might be deterred from confrontation at the outset of a conflict and yield to the aggressor's demands. There is no empirical basis for this view, but it is widely held among civilians being appointed to positions in the Trump Administration.
  - b. Build and deploy nuclear-armed "Tomahawk" cruise missiles for deployment on submarines. The U.S. deployed such weapons for many years but they were taken off the subs by the George Bush, Sr. administration in 2000. They were then held in storage, but formally retired in 2013. As a result, new missiles would have to be built, but conceivably the older warheads are still in storage and could be viable. These weapons are said to be important to Japan and South Korea, as they believe that the submarines' deployment in East Asia provides a more powerful deterrent than U.S. strategic submarines and other strategic forces deployed farther away. Again, there is no empirical basis for this belief, but it is widely shared in the administration.

Most importantly, the new NPR might relax U.S. policy and doctrine concerning when

the U.S. might use nuclear weapons. The current NPR says the United States would use such weapons only, "in extreme circumstances to defend the vital interests of the United States or its allies and partners," and that it would never use them against nuclear weapon states in compliance with their obligations under the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT). U.S. policy has sought to constrain potential uses of nuclear weapons for many years. Reversal of this movement toward curtailing the role of nuclear weapons would put the U.S. in the same doctrinal space as Russia, which has emphasized the possibility of nuclear use in recent years to compensate for its weaknesses in conventional military capabilities. It also would be a gross violation of the spirit of the NPT and the pledge in that Treaty by the nuclear weapon states to work to eliminate all nuclear weapons. It would bolster North Korea's position that developing a nuclear posture is essential for its survival, as well as strengthen the hands of the hard-liners in Tehran who wish to resume Iran's weapons program. And it would encourage those in many other countries who argue that nuclear weapons are essential to security.

We are on the cusp of a new era of nuclear proliferation. To my mind, this is the greatest nuclear danger raised by President Trump!

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## Note

1. In connection with the Korean War in 1950 and 1953; in connection with the conflict over certain "offshore islands" (Matsu, Quemoy, and the Tachens) in 1954, 1955, and 1958; and in connection with the war in Vietnam in 1969.