

Beyond the Tweets: President Trump's Continuity in Military Operations

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Abstract

Scholars and analysts continue reviewing and analyzing elements of change and continuity in President Trump's US national security policy. Voices within the media and policy community have often questioned whether it is descending into chaos.¹ Behind the focus of the daily news cycle is a more profound question: is President Trump's approach to the use of military force characterized more by change or continuity compared to his predecessors? The prevailing opinion has favored change. We argue that even the apparently confusing periods of the first year of the Trump administration have been characterized more by continuity in military force decisions than change. In this article, we outline the reasons for this claim and defend it through three examples involving military forces: anti-Islamic State operations in Syria and Iraq, combating the Taliban in Afghanistan, and confronting North Korea.

With over a year having passed since Donald Trump's inauguration, American scholars and analysts have gone into overdrive in reviewing his record to date, both predicting and prescribing his administration's future national security policy. The daily tide of presidential tweets and

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occasional interviews on Fox TV has often been regarded as the primary indicator of the president's thinking. Trump's grand strategy has been characterized as "hard-nosed and realistic—and less ambitious and idealistic than prior efforts . . . a 'corrective' to the past 16 years of American foreign and security policies that overestimated America's influence and importance, and lost track of priorities."² His senior staff has labeled it "pragmatic realism."³ And it has generally been assumed by policy scholars and media that the president's outpouring of often contentious comments is indicative of both American foreign policy and the country's evolving military strategy.⁴ To date, a variety of views have been expressed about President Trump's approach to foreign and security policies, that it: is nonexistent; is haphazard and chaotic, and thus incoherent; is "transactional" and pragmatic; or is ideological—an "America First" approach interpreted by some as isolationist but better understood as Jacksonian populism.⁵ But the widespread consensus is that chaos rules and the president is fickle, often undermining his staff's comments on a variety of issues spanning from Afghanistan to North Korea, NATO, and various conflicts in the Middle East. The successive firings of both Rex Tillerson and H. R. McMaster, to be replaced by more hawkish appointees Mike Pompeo and John Bolton, respectively, have amplified that view. Moreover, President Trump's cabinet officials have chosen to gut the departments they lead by firing or not replacing departing staff. Indeed, by 1 December 2017, the Trump administration was estimated to have filled only 26 of 54 of its top Department of Defense jobs and 55 of 153 Department of State positions.⁶ This indicates there may be elements of truth to the criticisms. Certainly, the 2017 *National Security Strategy* did nothing to dispel the confusion, with its focus on China and Russia as strategic competitors, in contrast to the president's favorable comments about the leadership of both, and an emphasis on a multilateral approach, versus the president's occasional unilateral decisions.⁷

But behind the focus of the daily news cycle, the firings and hirings, and official publications is a more profound question: is the administration's approach to actual military operations characterized more by continuity or change compared to his immediate predecessors? The prevailing opinion among elites to date, suggesting change, is based on the president's rhetoric and policy statements. That opinion is understandable. President Trump appears at times to be the "anti-Obama" in his

castigation of NATO allies; coddling of Saudi Arabia; blatant snubbing of Angela Merkel; demonization of London mayor Sadiq Khan; laudatory characterization of Vladimir Putin, Rodrigo Duterte, and Tayyip Erdogan; and willingness to launch Tomahawk missiles against the Syrian government. Except for the missile strike, none of these examples entail military operations.

We dissent from the popular judgment that focuses predominantly on chaos and change when it comes to the critical realm of national security by examining the conduct of military operations. Our optic thus moves beyond the tweets by surveying what American military forces have done in the administration's first year. We suggest that, given his rhetoric, President Trump's influence to date in shifting the contours of America's existing or potential military operations has been more modest than might be expected. We contend that President Trump's campaign promises to initiate larger, radical military changes have gone unfulfilled. Rather than his spoken threats to unleash "fire and fury" on North Korea's regime, his speeches proclaiming a new strategy in Afghanistan, or his tweets about launching a larger war that would "bomb the hell out of ISIS" and then seize Iraq's oil fields, the administration's behavior to date has predominantly had the hallmarks of continuity, not change.⁸

Recognizing that the churning of senior appointments may change this pattern, we nonetheless defend our claim and explain the reasons for the disjuncture between President Trump's radical rhetoric and the general continuity demonstrated by his administration's ongoing and prospective military operations. The reasoning includes how military operations are constrained by local conditions and reinforced by domestic and leadership constraints. We then provide three high-profile examples to substantiate our position, specifically chosen because of both their size and significance and the fact that they have received significant media attention since the inauguration: anti-Islamic State operations in Syria and Iraq, efforts to combat the Taliban in Afghanistan, and the military movements and potential consequences of the ongoing nuclear crisis with North Korea. In the first two scenarios, the circumstances have remained consistent and so have the operations. In the North Korean case, a change in military operations has occurred, but it has been influenced by changing circumstances in the theater of war and so remains a deterrent approach coupled with an offer to negotiate consistent with the behavior of his predecessors. Pointedly, the ramping up of North

Korean aggression has resulted in a comparable increase in American operational deployment and preparedness. Collectively, these three geographically diverse cases focus on priority areas most scholars and analysts regard as the priorities of contemporary national security strategy: counterterrorism, counterinsurgency, and preventing nuclear conflict.

Drivers of Continuity in Military Operations

American military operations in the twenty-first century must adapt to local conditions and a dynamically evolving environment.⁹ This is because local military operations are conditioned by the answers to three questions. First, what type of actors do US forces face? During the Cold War, American planners largely (although not exclusively, as the Viet Cong demonstrated) had to strategize against adversarial states or state proxies. They still exist—from Iran to North Korea—as the recent *National Security Strategy* stressed. But now the US must also contend with a variety of nonstate actors, stretching from transnational terrorist groups and criminal organizations to pirates and even private corporations who participate, for example, in money laundering.

Second, what type of threat does the US face? As the number and types of strategic actors have proliferated, so have the forms of threats. The Cold War concentrated the minds of American strategic planners on narrowly defined military threats, notably the Warsaw Pact and assorted client nationalist proxy groups (for example, in Angola or Mozambique). In the twenty-first century, however, the American public and thus American strategic planners have expanded the definition of a security threat to incorporate a variety of illicit flows: of people, of drugs, of nuclear and fissile materials and parts, and even of viruses.¹⁰ Relatedly, the geographic source of the threat has also expanded. It now includes a vast expanse of scattered ungovernable zones we now call “failed and fragile states,” whereas it used to be primarily focused on Europe.

Third, what forms of conflict does the US face, or potentially face, in a particular theater? The focus of the Cold War remained squarely on interstate forms of conflict such as conventional and nuclear war.¹¹ To that has now been added both asymmetric warfare (in fighting a succession of irregular wars in fragile states) and, more recently, hybrid conflicts that combine aspects of the first two with novel technological elements

that include cyber instruments, as the Russians vividly demonstrated in Eastern Ukraine.

American forces now face varying configurations of all three, depending on local conditions in a theater of conflict. They contend with pirates off the Somali coast and criminal gangs seeking to smuggle drugs into the United States, who both use asymmetric means and are motivated by little more than theft. They combat jihadists in the Middle East who are engaged in an ideological struggle and use asymmetric and hybrid means. And they oppose a North Korean state that poses (at least potentially) an existential threat to US territory. Furthermore, many strategists believe that a new era of great power conflict has already begun with China or Russia. In summary, the combinations abound.

By focusing on continuity, we are not suggesting that operational changes in strategy never occur. In practice, as we demonstrate, these factors can and do change in theaters of conflict. The character of the opposition can evolve, as was the case when the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Columbia (FARC) morphed from a revolutionary group into a transnational criminal organization. The nature of a threat can change, as North Korea's recent development of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM) that threaten American territory highlights. And the form of warfare can alter, as the Islamic State (IS) shifting from employing conventional and irregular warfare tactics in a territorial conflict to transnational terrorism using asymmetric tactics illustrates. Strategies therefore change to meet local conditions.

Nonetheless, although operational circumstances may evolve over time, presidents generally inherit the same or similar ones of their predecessors. President Trump—despite his forthright approach—is as much of a captive to these constraints as were his predecessors, George W. Bush and Barack Obama. Despite the president and his advisors' proclamation that they will pursue different approaches than those of previous administrations, circumstances generally limit their degrees of freedom in the prosecution of military operations.

Domestic Bureaucratic and Leadership Constraints on Military Operations

Furthermore, presidents inherit both the domestic political, bureaucratic, and historical capabilities and constraints of the American political system and national security state. Incoming presidents invariably de-

pend on a national security structure developed over decades. It includes, below the level of political appointees, many of the same personnel and, of course, standard operating processes, budgetary claims made by powerful congressional constituencies, legal constraints, administrative traditions, and institutional cultures. The size and structure of the national security apparatus by default reinforces a propensity for continuity and can therefore often undermine the grand promises of politicians.

As many journalists and scholars have documented, especially in the wake of 9/11, the national security state has inexorably grown, with a base budget increase of more than 50 percent between 2001 and 2016.¹² With that has come an increase in the size of its bureaucracy. That bureaucracy, broadly defined, now includes the Department of Homeland Security and the various intelligence agencies, those responsible for managing the massive growth of government contractors and private security services, and departments specifically created to address new forms of conflict across the entire electromagnetic spectrum (including cyber and space). Pointedly, national security professionals, regardless of their personal views and even any political differences, cannot simply be ignored; they are necessary for policy and strategy implementation. Indeed, they are more valuable than ever in the absence of more than half the number of key appointees. Furthermore, entirely consistent with the classic scholarship on bureaucratic and organizational behavior, their familiarity with ongoing operations and standard operating procedures generally reinforces the strategic status quo rather than radical change, often for fear of the unknown consequences of any major shift.¹³ Complete withdrawal from Afghanistan, for example, sounds good on a bumper sticker, but the long-held concern of thereby giving terrorists a base from which to attack the United States suggests otherwise.

President Trump's choice of leadership has reinforced this trend. The incoming leaders of national security departments often arrive intent on instituting dramatic strategic changes. Sometimes they even succeed in some aspects, a notable example being the changes in immigration policy instituted by the Trump administration's Departments of Justice and Homeland Security to date.¹⁴ President Trump chose, however, to install three distinguished career military personnel at the apex of his administration: Lt Gen H. R. McMaster as his second National Security Advisor, Gen James Mattis as secretary of Defense, and Gen John F. Kelly, initially as secretary of Homeland Defense and now chief of staff. Their extensive

and distinguished military careers socialized them to view strategic challenges from a pragmatic, operational perspective rather than a dogmatic one. McMaster's studious personal manner reputedly grated the president, eventually leading to his departure. But if reports are to be believed, President Trump regards Mattis and Kelly as credible and authoritative to the point where he routinely delegates strategy to them.¹⁵ It is not surprising, therefore, to discover that they reputedly favor institutionally and culturally embedded conventions, abjuring many of the president's more radical proposals (as McMaster did) when it comes to force deployment.¹⁶ In effect, they recognize the contextual factors that operate in differing theaters of war—such as Secretary Mattis' insistence on sustaining troop deployments in Eastern Europe—that often reinforce the propensity for continuity.¹⁷ Commentators, such as George Will, expressed an early concern that Trump's third national security advisor, John Bolton, may adopt a more aggressive approach to force deployment.¹⁸ At this point, however, there is no evidence by which to measure the relationship between Bolton's fiery rhetoric and his prescriptions when it comes to deployments. Time will tell if Bolton will be willing and able to impose new deployment patterns on both his more cautious colleagues and a possibly recalcitrant bureaucratic apparatus.

Thus, while sounding a cautious note, the available evidence to date has generated an ironic paradox in President Trump's case. The vacuum created by his administration's lack of senior appointments, coupled with the training of many of those he has appointed to leadership roles, has collectively reinforced the natural tendency to be circumspect in instigating any major operational changes.

From Top-Down to Bottom-Up in the Calibration of Military Operations

In effect, our approach reverses the focus of analysis usually employed by scholars, politicians, and many pundits: from the deductive, top-down approach inherent in most discussions of national security (reflected in the most recent *National Security Strategy* and *National Defense Strategy*) to a bottom-up one that examines what the US military does on a daily basis. High-profile debates aside, operations are calibrated to deal with local conditions and continuity is reinforced by domestic constraints.¹⁹

Such an approach clearly has its advocates. Senior military leaders like calibrated approaches because they often correspond to what combatant commanders tell them needs to be done. Bureaucrats in Washington like calibrated approaches because they generally conform to the standard operating procedures used in the Pentagon when the military encounters specific challenges—and are thus the default position when faced with the jostling and infighting common to Washington. And despite their best efforts, political leaders often abandon their commitment to their chosen electoral promises and succumb to the need to address a problem this way because of the exigencies of responding to a vocal media and an anguished public about an imminent threat.

Strategy is distinct from policy, and both are distinct from field operations. What we describe links both to military operations: what the military, diplomats, and senior policy makers do rather than what politicians say or what official documents, spokespeople, or even public statements claim. Our view is that, given the often-contradictory statements of President Trump and his closest staff members, it is important to ignore the tweets and focus on how operational imperatives constrain the strategic choices of the president and other senior policy makers. Actions speak far louder than words—and the deployment of resources portrays those actions.

Admittedly, 12 months is a relatively limited timeframe on which to evaluate the new administration's record. But from our perspective, it is not surprising to read headlines such as “Trump Embraces Pillars of Obama's Foreign Policy,”²⁰ “Trump's ‘Secret Plan’ to Defeat ISIS Looks a Lot Like Obama's,”²¹ “Clinton and Obama Laid the Groundwork for Donald Trump's War on Immigrants,”²² or, as we discuss below, the suggestion that “Trump's Afghanistan Strategy Is Simply Old Wine in a New Bottle.”²³ Certainly, there are individual foreign policy decisions that rise to the level of categorical and profound changes, like the decision to withdraw from the Paris Climate Change Agreement. But we argue it is hard to find evidence of any major shifts in military operations. And when they occur, those shifts are driven more by changes in the actors, threats, and potential form of warfare than by the president's preferences.

In the brief examples that follow, we illustrate our claims of a surprising propensity for continuity when it comes to core deployments despite President Trump's avowed pledge to reverse Obama's approach.

Our examples are clearly not comprehensive. But they share important qualities. First, we examine three of the most prominent national security disputes in the last year. Second, they are all cases where candidate Trump promised radical change but then, as president, he subsequently admitted that “it’s complicated.” And finally, they are cases that are of the greatest security concern to national security scholars, the administration, and the public, involving the issues of terrorism and nuclear conflict.²⁴

Combating the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq

The Obama administration’s approach to the fight against IS was a strategy of sponsorship, often derided as “leading from behind.” This approach generally entails the United States abdicating a leadership role while bolstering and subsidizing allies who share America’s interests and are motivated to implement them.²⁵ President Obama self-consciously—and at some political cost—resisted calls for greater engagement. Notably, he reneged on his threat to take the initiative and launch a military offensive if the Assad regime in Syria continued to use chemical weapons against civilians. But consistent with a sponsorship strategy, the new administration did logistically support the Kurds, Iraqi government forces, and various rebel groups in Syria in their general campaign to repel IS and Assad in both countries, even as Kurdish involvement raised the ire of Turkey, America’s NATO ally.

In practice, the US contribution under Obama was largely limited to providing materiel and training while standing by with airpower, providing intelligence and, on occasion, forward support to these proxy forces. This strategy saved American lives and helped avoid the messy domestic politics of again escalating the US role in the region. Conversely, of course, it also exposed Obama to accusations of inaction and inconstancy in the struggle against the Islamic State.

As a candidate, Trump excoriated President Obama, claimed that Hillary Clinton would continue this strategy, and claimed to have a “secret plan” to destroy IS.” More remarkably, the candidate vowed “I would bomb the s*** out of them.”²⁶ In that vein, the new administration’s early decisions were well publicized. The Trump administration instituted a policy shift by loosening the rules of engagement to allow larger and more risky strikes in Syria, effecting the one possible area of operational change. It also initially appeared markedly more open to col-

laborating with Russia to address the Syrian war, before later launching air strikes against an airfield used by the Assad regime and shooting down a Syrian MIG, actions that led to fears of direct conflict with Russian forces.

Administratively, a key decision by President Trump was that the formulation and supervision of operational strategy (and related troop levels) would be delegated to the military command, whether a sign of Trump's faith in Mattis, intended to dampen some of the initial infighting amongst his national security and political aides, or as a way of politically distancing himself from any responsibility if things eventually go awry. Civilian leadership had maintained a tight control over military strategy in the two prior administrations. But in the Trump administration the locus of decision making has firmly shifted to the military, generating attendant fears of an abrupt change in strategy and thus operations.

From our perspective, however, the key question concerns whether these policy and potential strategic shifts have resulted in major operational changes. Yes, the Trump administration has undertaken several high-profile military strikes in Syria and employed harsher rhetoric about destroying the Islamic State, which is fairly easy to do given the IS retreat throughout 2017. Yet, any operational changes have been nominal. As one commentator suggested, Trump "mainly accelerated a battle plan developed by President Obama."²⁷ There has been no large-scale recommitment of US forces. Instead, just as during the Obama administration, the fighting against IS has predominantly been left to proxies, including Kurds, rebel forces in Syria, and what passes for central government troops and militias in Iraq. As before, the US contributes training, logistics, intelligence, and occasional air strikes. It is not a frontline state in either theater, and there are no tangible signs to date that it intends to become one. The theaters where the battle against IS will be won or lost have been fought without a significant American presence.²⁸

Developments in the summer of 2017 suggested that the American-led coalition may be "nearing the endgame with ISIS."²⁹ Bryan McGurk, the special presidential envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter IS (a rare appointment by Obama retained by President Trump³⁰), argued that the changes in approach authorized by President Trump have "dramatically accelerated" the demise of IS.³¹ But these strategic and policy changes—more autonomy for local commanders and increased burden

sharing with international stakeholders—appear to have resulted in few operational changes.

This continuity works in diametrically opposed ways in terms of either possible “proclaimed” strategy. As far as is publicly known, the administration has no plans to de-escalate the anti-IS fight, as might be expected from “America First” rhetoric. Nor, on the other hand, has it undertaken new military, diplomatic, political, or economic initiatives that might result in differing or greater deployments on the ground, as might be expected from a more muscular or primacist approach to countering terrorism. Rather, adjustments to the strategy and operations initiated by Obama have borne fruit under President Trump, who in claiming victory nonetheless put his own spin on counterterror operations.³² But the evidence suggests that little has altered in terms of trajectory.

Doubling Down on Afghanistan

The United States launched Operation Enduring Freedom against the Taliban and those al-Qaeda members sheltering in Afghanistan under the Taliban’s protection weeks after the 9/11 attacks. The American strategy was consistent with a liberal one of multilateral leadership of NATO forces, with the goal of conquest and reconstruction. In the words of Barack Obama, George W. Bush’s “good war” eventually became a “forever” one, with his promise of a complete withdrawal being overtaken by circumstances.³³ The logic for continued engagement in Afghanistan is simple and apparently compelling for American strategists. Daniel Byman and Will McCants offer a critical assessment while helping to locate the Afghan conflict within the wider context of US global counterterrorism efforts: “Fear of safe havens and the politics that undergird it are misplaced. Safe havens can be dangerous, and at times it is vital for the United States to use force, even massive force, to disrupt them. Yet not all safe havens—and not all the groups in the havens—are created equal.”³⁴

In a world of unequal safe havens, Afghanistan has proven itself to be an exceptionally problematic one for American strategists. Withdrawal has become inconceivable as long as the threat of a Taliban resurgence is tangible. And the existence of a continued threat is undeniable, with tangible costs. In the past 16 years, more than 2,300 Americans have been killed and over 17,000 wounded. Yet neither the US, its NATO allies, nor the Afghan government has been able to defeat the Taliban or

allied Islamist forces. Subjugation has always been temporary, followed by resurgence.

As a private citizen, long before he began campaigning for the Republican presidential nomination, Donald Trump largely ignored this logic. He explicitly favored jettisoning a multilateral leadership strategy in favor of one of retrenchment when he tweeted, “We have wasted an enormous amount of blood and treasure in Afghanistan. Their government has zero appreciation. Let’s get out!”³⁵

But that abrupt change in strategy has not materialized. Secretary Mattis set the stage for a continuation in America’s “forever war” strategy when he acknowledged in testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee that “we are not winning in Afghanistan, right now, and we will correct this as soon as possible.”³⁶ And four months into the new administration, McMaster, who served in Afghanistan, and Mattis advocated committing an additional 3,000–5,000 American troops.³⁷ Notably, such figures would not be enough to destroy the Taliban and its allies but perhaps might be enough to staunch further losses, signaling little discernable shift in strategy from the Obama administration.

The future of US involvement in Afghanistan depends on the implementation of the general “South Asia Strategy” review commissioned by Mattis. It included changes in tactics within Afghanistan (more trainers and higher troop limits), greater pressure being exerted against Pakistan to stop any support for terrorist groups, and closer relations with India as a regional counterweight to both Pakistan and China.³⁸ Most publicly, and perhaps surprisingly, Mattis revealed before the Senate Armed Services Committee that US forces are operating under more aggressive rules of engagement: “You see some of the results of releasing our military from, for example, a proximity requirement—how close was the enemy to the Afghan or the U.S.-advised Special Forces.”³⁹ As a result, new reports suggest that “U.S. forces are no longer bound by requirements to be in contact with enemy forces in Afghanistan before opening fire.”⁴⁰ But the only tangible effect of any change to date has been an increase in the number of civilian casualties—reputedly rising by more than 50 percent—to record levels, as a result of the administration’s policy change.⁴¹ That’s because, as a practical matter, while the reputed increase in the actual number of US troops on the ground has not been substantial (from 11,000 to 14,000), the increase in air strikes has been.⁴² In September 2017, the United States conducted 751 air-

strikes in Afghanistan, a 50 percent increase over August's figures.⁴³ As always in counterinsurgency operations and civil wars, specialists endlessly debate whether it is possible to kill one's way to victory. The new administration has made it marginally easier to strike enemies from the air but not, yet, found a comparable foundation for a military victory or lasting political settlement. Operationally, in effect, the new administration has done more of the same.

Indeed, it appears that the administration's comprehensive position largely echoes the Afghanistan-Pakistan (AFPAK) strategy associated with Richard Holbrooke and announced 27 March 2009 by the Obama administration. As then-national security advisor Gen James Jones briefed, "The cornerstone of this strategy, I think, is that it's a regional approach. And for the first time, we will treat Afghanistan and Pakistan as two countries, but . . . with one challenge in one region."⁴⁴ It also coincided with a surge (a la 2007 Iraq⁴⁵) of American troops and, given the Obama administration's preference for multilateralism, increased troop contributions to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) from other NATO members.⁴⁶ The surge, of course, resulted in greater presence and a larger number of kinetic operations. President Obama did eventually de-emphasize the term AFPAK in 2010 because it was deeply unpopular with Pakistan.⁴⁷ But many academics, military experts, and government officials recognized the importance of thinking in broad, multifaceted regional terms in combating insurgents and terrorists in South Asia.⁴⁸ Secretary Mattis has offered the same.

President Trump undoubtedly faces the same domestic pressures to remain tough on terrorism faced by his predecessors. As such, the United States currently leads a coalition capable of propping up the Afghan central government and periodically sortieing against jihadists. The forever war in Afghanistan will likely continue indefinitely, with the United States sharing the burdens with NATO and local allies, even as political leaders preach an America First strategy.⁴⁹ Despite the end of the ISAF combat operations mission in 2014, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg is considering a request from Gen John Nicholson, commander of US Forces Afghanistan, to commit more forces from non-American members. The new troops will join NATO's Resolute Support mission to, in words predating President Trump's inauguration, "provide further training, advice and assistance for the Afghan security forces and institutions."⁵⁰

On 20 August 2017, President Trump delivered a major policy speech on the way ahead for American involvement. In it, the president acknowledged his longstanding criticisms of his predecessors before offering two major adjustments: a “shift from a time-based approach to one based on conditions” and “the integration of all instruments of American power—diplomatic, economic, and military—toward a successful outcome.”⁵¹ As many critics have suggested, neither adjustment seems transformational nor likely to improve the prospects of stabilizing Afghanistan.⁵² Rather, the new administration appears to be traveling down a well-trodden road. As President Trump conceded in a *New York Times* interview when discussing Afghanistan, “My original instinct was to pull out . . . and, historically, I like following my instincts. But all my life I’ve heard that decisions are much different when you sit behind the desk in the Oval Office.”⁵³ It remains to be seen whether the reintroduction of these 3,500 troops will change the dynamic of the last 16 years.⁵⁴

North Korea and the Game of Nuclear Chicken

Long-standing tensions with North Korea (DPRK), dating to the 1953 armistice ending the Korean War, flared even before President Trump assumed office. As president-elect, apparently in response to provocative statements by Supreme leader Kim Jong Un, he tweeted that “North Korea just stated that it is in the final stages of developing a nuclear weapon capable of reaching parts of the U.S. It won’t happen!”⁵⁵ News accounts had suggested that, having offered a barrage of increasingly incendiary ballistic missile tests and defiant language over the past 12 months, North Korea was planning further tests and to restart its Yongbyon plutonium reactor.⁵⁶ North Korea’s technological advances have been impressive. And the tests themselves have often been confrontationally timed, beginning in February 2017, when North Korea tested the Pukguksong-2, reportedly a solid-fueled, medium-range system, while Mattis was on his first official tour of Asia as the newly appointed secretary of defense. This pattern continued. By the end of the first year of the Trump administration, “Pyongyang ha[d] successfully tested two different types of intercontinental ballistic missiles, a new intermediate-range ballistic missile, a solid-fuel missile based off a submarine-launched design, and its most powerful nuclear device.”⁵⁷

President Trump had offered inconsistent positions on the North Korea nuclear program when a private citizen and then a presidential candi-

date. Almost two decades ago he appeared to favor a preemptive strike against the regime. But on the campaign trail he mused that China should take care of the problem and/or Japan should develop its own nuclear weapons.⁵⁸

In contrast to these shifts in position, his approach in the opening months of his administration remained consistent. He was quick to threaten military action and quick to resist calls, both from inside his administration and from the international community, to attempt further diplomacy to achieve a political solution (although subsequently, by March 2018, the prospect of Trump meeting with Kim Jong Un was raised as an option). Furthermore, the president pressured allies to both condemn the Kim regime and impose stronger sanctions on the North Korean government and its key leaders.⁵⁹

The crisis escalated not simply because of the North Korean missile tests and inflammatory language but also because of President Trump's public responses. One notable example was his claim in an interview with Fox Business News that "we are sending an armada. Very powerful. We have submarines, very powerful, far more powerful than an aircraft carrier, that I can tell you."⁶⁰ McMaster made clear in an interview that "all our options are on the table," although he also emphasized that he hoped there would not be a need for military action.⁶¹ And Trump's own senior military leadership argued that a ground invasion would be required to eliminate the prospects of a nuclear attack but was not feasible, in part because of the enormous cost it would entail in terms of South Korean civilian casualties—reinforcing what his predecessors had learned over the last two decades.⁶²

The Trump administration has also undertaken a wide variety of military operational responses. Specifically, it initiated several demonstrations of power, including a rare multilateral exercise involving three aircraft carriers: the USS *Ronald Reagan*, the USS *Nimitz*, and the USS *Theodore Roosevelt*. The exercises, which included elements of the Japanese Maritime Self Defense Force and the South Korean navy, was officially intended to "conduct air defense drills, sea surveillance, replenishments at sea and other training in international waters."⁶³ In a speech while visiting South Korea, President Trump himself made his main point clear: "We sent three of the largest aircraft carriers in the world and they're now positioned. We have a nuclear submarine, we

have many things happening that we hope—we hope to God we never have to use.”⁶⁴

In addition to a military demonstration of offensive power, the Trump administration hastened deployment of the terminal high altitude defense (THAAD) missile defense system to South Korea. In theory, it could provide a modest level of defense against the DPRK's large number of intermediate missiles. But this move itself generated controversy. News reports suggest that South Korean citizens believe the THAAD deployment signifies that the Trump administration is preparing for a preemptive attack.⁶⁵ Moreover, in an incident highlighting the tensions between crisis management and the administration's unilateralism, many South Korean were offended by President Trump's off-the-cuff suggestion that South Korea should pay \$1 billion for the system's deployment. Amid protests in South Korea, on 30 April 2017, McMaster reaffirmed the details of an earlier agreement on THAAD in which South Korea bore no financial burden.⁶⁶

In North Korea, the Trump administration confronts a state actor armed with a large conventional military and a growing array of ballistic missiles capable, once engineering and operational challenges are resolved, of carrying nuclear warheads and reaching key treaty allies like Japan and now, potentially, American territory in Guam and the mainland. A preemptive strike involving American forces, of dubious legality under international law unless an attack was deemed imminent, is one of the military options under discussion.⁶⁷ Indeed, administration officials including the president and then-Secretary of State Rex Tillerson have indicated that, in Tillerson's words, “If they elevate the threat of their weapons program to a level that we believe requires action then that [military] option is on the table.”⁶⁸

Journalists and former Obama administration officials have publicly suggested that some Trump officials, part of an informal “war party,” are advocating limited attacks sometime in 2018.⁶⁹ These officials argue that the character of the North Korean threat has swiftly changed. The first, most prominent factor is the DPRK's rapid upgrading of new missile and nuclear technology. The second is the increased volubility, and now feasibility, of their threats against the American homeland. While North Korea's leadership has threatened the US before, its existential character is novel.⁷⁰ Yet, the specific challenges facing US or allied forces in taking offensive action against North Korea remain unchanged. As Tom Ricks

reminded us, the United States has been preparing for a North Korean military crisis since the cease-fire concluded the Korean War—and preparing intensively since Pyongyang threatened military action over 20 years ago.⁷¹ North Korea's conventional forces, while out-of-date and, in some cases, poorly maintained, are formidable. The Council on Foreign Relations summarizes the weapons systems maintained by the North Korean 1.1 million-man armed forces as having “more than 1,300 aircraft, nearly 300 helicopters, 430 combatant vessels, 250 amphibious vessels, 70 submarines, 4,300 tanks, 2,500 armored vehicles, and 5,500 multiple-rocket launchers. Experts also estimate that North Korea has upwards of one thousand missiles of varying ranges.”⁷² Perhaps most importantly, even if North Korea cannot yet reach the American mainland with nuclear armed warheads,⁷³ its nuclear weapons pose threats to American forces (not to mention allies) in theater, some accounts suggest it may possess biological and chemical weapons, and cyberattacks attributed to North Korean actors have disrupted commerce and could do so again.⁷⁴

President Trump's retaliatory threats invoking “fire and fury” against an enemy (the DPRK) and criticism of an ally (South Korea) may not have helped.⁷⁵ Indeed, it might have been tactically naïve, as some critics contend, because it has boxed the United States into an unfavorable position with regard to future negotiations.⁷⁶

Nonetheless, to suggest that any operational changes are a product of President Trump's ill-judged statements is mistaken. That is because, when it comes to military operations related to the current North Korean crisis and preparations for a potential war, it is hard to argue that either President Bush or President Obama could have done much else under these circumstances.⁷⁷ Obama's efforts with Iran suggest he might well have first tried to negotiate. But his offers to talk to the DPRK when they conducted cyber hacking and espionage operations did not prove notably more effective.⁷⁸ Furthermore, it is hard to argue that the changing military circumstances—a growing existential threat coupled with virulent rhetoric from Kim Jong Un—would not dictate the installation of THAAD missile systems and the assemblage of what President Trump referred to as a powerful “armada,” regardless of who was president.⁷⁹ Any operational changes therefore represent the culmination of a long-held position and have been prompted more by dynamic local conditions than any major shift. America has adopted a deterrent military strategy

against North Korea for six decades. The current conflict is its latest manifestation of that strategy. Rhetoric aside, by the early months of 2018, it is therefore hard to imagine an alternative operational response.

President Trump and Future Military Operations?

On 19 January 2018, Mattis presented to the public an unclassified summary of the Trump administration's long-awaited *National Defense Strategy*, the DOD's counterpart to the National Security Council's *National Security Strategy* released in December 2017.⁸⁰ It clarified some but not all of the outstanding questions regarding the administration's broad strategy.⁸¹ On the one hand, it confirmed the *NSS* focus on preparing for great power competition; on the other, it left unresolved how the United States military would extricate itself from Afghanistan, Syria, and Iraq. Further, while the *NDS* summary argues that "[e]ffectively expanding the competitive space requires combined actions with the U.S. interagency to employ all dimensions of national power," it remains silent on how this will be successful given budgetary limits on foreign operations spending.


The new *NDS* has already provided more fodder for academics, pundits, and the media.⁸² So has Trump's replacement of senior appointees with more hawkish officials like Pompeo at State and Bolton as national security advisor. But neither the new document nor the new appointments are likely, at least in the short run, to substantially alter the military's implementation of any overarching American national security strategy. To understand whether the Trump *NDS* has altered US strategic behavior, commentators will have to analyze military operations rather than speeches, outbursts on social media, or even planning documents. Given the evidence of the first 12 months of the Trump administration, we expect that any such analysis will reveal far more continuity with the recent past than many expected from a president who relentlessly criticized the choices of his predecessors and called for radical change.

We do not suggest that operational change cannot occur. It can and does. The admixture of shifts in the external environment and even possibly the relentless pursuit of preferences among domestic leaders can eventually overcome bureaucratic inertia. Furthermore, the increase in resources and eventually military capabilities may contribute to change, especially when any threat's scope rapidly increases.

Yet the evidence to date regarding this administration is significant and possibly generalizable: even those that promise and pursue acute shifts in operations encounter the constraints imposed by the theater of war. The Afghan and IS conflicts have evolved incrementally over several years. Little fundamentally has changed on the ground since President Trump took office. The North Korean case has done so more rapidly, even though Mattis conceded that the new North Korean ICBMs have “not yet shown to be a capable threat against us right now.”⁸³ In each case, within reasonable parameters, the requisites of military operations now largely generally mirror those of President Trump’s predecessors. Even the acceleration in deployments we note in the North Korean case is consistent with the historical trajectory. As Jacqueline Klimas suggests, despite all this pre-positioning of military resources, President Trump’s approach to North Korea to date still looks a lot like President Obama’s, a mixture of deployments and offers to negotiate.⁸⁴ Of course, the crisis is taking place with North Korea as we write in early 2018. It could abate or escalate at any point. Miscalculation or arrogance could trigger a military conflict verging from military skirmishes to the truly catastrophic.

No doubt, broader changes in the external environment, further replacements in cabinet-level leadership, and even congressional politics will help reshape strategic documents such as the *National Security Strategy*, the *National Defense Strategy*, and the *Nuclear Posture Review* over the lifetime of the Trump administration. There are already signs of an emerging Trumpian grand strategy that focuses on strategic competition with revisionist great powers—Russia and China—and “rogue” states—North Korea and Iran. But as we have argued elsewhere, “in the absence of radical changes in culture, institutional decision-making and in resources . . . the United States will muddle along, pursuing calibrated strategies by default, despite the intellectual effort and ink spilled in an effort to develop a coherent grand strategy.”⁸⁵

Nonetheless, the nature of the adversaries, the character of the threats, and the potential forms of conflict themselves, varying in different regions of the globe, will determine what military operations are possible given the capabilities available to combatant commanders. To an extent alarming to his supporters and consoling to his critics, the evidence to date suggests that President Trump’s military leadership has adopted, and will continue to adopt, what President Obama disparagingly referred to

as “the Washington Playbook”—notably the propensity to pursue “militarized responses”—when it comes to facing national security challenges. The United States, furthermore, is likely to continue to do so in the foreseeable future.⁸⁶ 

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