

United States Foreign Policy: In Trump's Cruise-Missile Diplomacy, Iran and North Korea Could Be Next

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The president has steadily increased the use of force, relaxing the rules of engagement and giving his generals free rein.

The cruise-missile attack launched by US destroyers against an air base in western Syria in response to a chemical-weapons attack by Syrian government forces has been widely described in the media as the first major use of military force by Donald Trump since assuming the presidency. The attack, involving 59 Tomahawk missiles, was certainly a significant use of force, causing extensive (if not calamitous) damage to the Syrian base. But it really should be viewed as the second such action by Trump, following an ill-fated raid by US Special Forces in Yemen on January 29. Even more importantly, it should be seen as the prelude to further exercises of military might—each likely to prove more risky and ferocious than the one before.

Throughout the presidential campaign, Trump made it clear that he was perfectly comfortable with the notion of using military force to advance US interests abroad, despite chiding President Obama and Hillary Clinton (in her role as secretary of state) for involving the United States in protracted Middle Eastern conflicts. Last September, when asked how he would respond to a recent incident in which Iranian naval craft veered dangerously close to American ships in the Persian Gulf, he told reporters, “With Iran, when they circle our beautiful destroyers with their little boats, and they make gestures at our people that they shouldn’t be allowed to make, they will be shot out of the water.”

In the few months since he has occupied the White House, moreover, Trump has demonstrated ever-increasing comfort with the use of force, giving his top military officials—“my generals,” as he likes to call them—greater leeway to plan and conduct military actions in active war zones, including Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen.

It was Trump who gave the go-ahead for the bungled Yemen raid, in which more than two dozen civilians were killed.

This was first evident in late January, when he approved the nighttime raid on a compound in central Yemen thought to house militants of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). Although planning for the raid had begun during the final weeks of the Obama administration, it was Trump—in a meeting attended by his chief strategist, Stephen Bannon, his son-in-law, Jared Kushner, Defense Secretary Gen. James Mattis, and then-National Security Adviser Gen. Michael Flynn—who gave the go-ahead for this mission. Whether due to bungled planning or inadequate White House oversight (or some combination of both), the raid ended in disaster, with a US Navy Seal, Chief Petty Officer William Owens, and more than two dozen civilians (including several children) killed.

Despite this fiasco, Trump has stepped up the delegation of decision-making authority to senior military officers, making it easier for them to initiate combat operations in a half-dozen countries. In Yemen, for example, the president has granted a Pentagon request to designate parts of three provinces as an “area of active hostilities,” giving local commanders the authority to conduct raids and drone attacks against suspected militants without consulting top White House officials. In the weeks following the botched raid in which Owens was killed, the United States launched over 70 drone attacks on Yemen—far more than the total authorized by Obama throughout all of 2016.

Trump has also designated parts of Somalia as an “area of active hostilities,” giving officers in the US Africa Command (Africom) increased leeway to conduct raids and drone strikes against members of the Al Shabaab insurgent group (another Al Qaeda franchise). “It’s very important and very helpful for us to have a little bit more flexibility, a little bit more timeliness, in terms of decision-making process,” said Gen. Thomas Waldhauser, Africom’s commander. “It allows us to prosecute targets in a more rapid fashion.”

Officers at the Central Command (Centcom), responsible for US combat operations in Iraq and Syria, have also spoken of the greater flexibility that President Trump has given them. As they prepared for a higher tempo of military operations against ISIS, as demanded by Trump, “We recognized the nature of the fight was going to change and that we had to ensure that authorities [sic] were down to the right level and that we empowered the on-scene commander,” Centcom commander Gen. Joseph Votel said in late March.

This delegation of “authorities” to lower-level commanders resulted in a March decision by Votel to deploy an additional 400 soldiers in Syria without first securing a presidential go-ahead; the White House was reportedly notified of the decision, but only after Secretary Mattis had given his approval and the deployment was in motion. Many observers also believe that this leave-it-to-local-commanders approach was partly responsible for the March 17 air strike on a residential compound in western Mosul that left over 200 Iraqi civilians dead, including many children.

The Tomahawk strikes against Syria on April 7 should be viewed against this backdrop. Over the 77 days between his inauguration and his decision to launch the missile attack, Trump had grown increasingly comfortable with the exercise of military force, authorizing increased US combat activities throughout the Middle East. From all accounts, he did not hesitate in ordering Friday’s strikes: There was no agonizing over international law, the need to consult Congress, the impact on America’s foreign relations, or other such considerations that might have preoccupied President Obama. We can also be certain that Trump is highly pleased with the outcome: Not only did many Republican hawks, including Senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham, praise the move, but so did many of his fiercest Democratic critics, including Senator Chuck Schumer.

Of greater concern, this all must be viewed as part of a Trumpian learning curve, whereby the president is gaining experience with—and evident satisfaction in—using military force against those weaker than us. This is an impulse that will not be fulfilled by the single-salvo strike against Syria alone—there will be a third, a fourth, and successive steps up the ladder of escalation.

Trump hinted that North Korea could be the next US target if it did not cease its pursuit of nuclear-armed ICBMs.

What might those next steps look like? The most likely scenarios are preemptive military strikes against North Korea and/or Iran. Indeed, Trump had no sooner finished giving the order to attack Syria on Thursday night than he was hinting to President Xi Jinping of China—then at Trump’s Mar-a-Lago resort in Florida for a dinner with the president—that North Korea could be next on this list of US targets if it did not cease its pursuit of nuclear-armed intercontinental ballistic missiles.

Following the dinner, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson (who was also at the dinner), told reporters that Trump had informed the Chinese leader that Washington was prepared to take unspecified unilateral steps if China failed to rein in the North Koreans. “President Trump indicated to President Xi that...we would be happy to work with them” in addressing the North Korean threat, Tillerson said, while adding that the president “indicated...that we would, and are, prepared to chart our own course if this is something China is just unable to co-ordinate with us.”

As if to demonstrate the seriousness of this warning, the US Pacific Command announced on Saturday that it was deploying the aircraft carrier Carl Vinson and its escort vessels to waters off Korea in case they are needed for action against the North. “The US Pacific Command [Pacom] ordered the Carl Vinson Strike Group north as a prudent measure to maintain readiness and presence in the Western Pacific,” said Pacom spokesman Dave Benham. North Korea will celebrate the 105th birthday of its founding president, Kim Il-sung, on April 15, and some analysts speculate this could be the occasion for Kim’s grandson, and the country’s current ruler, Kim Jong-un, to order a fresh round of nuclear or missile tests—the possible pretext for a US preemptive strike against North Korea.

An attack on Iranian missile facilities is another possible scenario. In early February, following an Iranian ballistic-missile test, then-National Security Adviser Michael Flynn declared, “As of today, we are officially putting Iran on notice,” suggesting the administration was considering a range of steps to counter future Iranian provocations of this sort. Flynn did not provide any specifics, but other White House officials made it clear that military action was on the menu of possible choices. Although Flynn, a notorious Iranophobe, was removed from office on February 13, there is no reason to believe that President Trump or Defense Secretary Mattis—also known for his anti-Iranian views—have retracted the military option. If anything, following the cruise-missile strike on Syria, we have to assume it would appear even more attractive to Trump.

It doesn’t take much imagination to conclude that any of these steps would result in far greater bloodshed than any of the military moves taken by Trump so far. An attack on either North Korea or Iran would probably trigger retaliatory action of one sort or another, possibly involving missile attacks on American allies and troop concentrations in surrounding areas—conceivably, in North Korea’s case, entailing the use of chemical or nuclear weapons. Even if North Korea refrained from using its chemical or nuclear weapons, it could pulverize Seoul with artillery shells fired from just north of the DMZ. Where this might lead is anyone’s guess, but it is hard to imagine the resulting inferno ending after a few hours of back-and-forth missile salvos.

It is essential, then, that the attack on Syria not be viewed as a one-off event, to be evaluated exclusively on its own terms. Yes, it says a lot about America’s ambivalence toward the ongoing slaughter in Syria (how much effect, really, did the US strike have on Assad’s capacity to wage war against his own people?), but rather should be read as a practice round in Trump’s evolution as a war president, with far more dangerous engagements to come. If we have any hopes for a peaceful future, we must take this as a serious warning sign and do all we can to prevent further steps up Trump’s escalatory ladder.

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* "In Trump's Cruise-Missile Diplomacy, Iran and North Korea Could Be Next". The Nation:
<https://www.thenation.com/article/in-trumps-cruise-missile-diplomacy-iran-and-north-korea-could-be-next/>

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