

The Trump Administration's approach to the security of South Korea

Colonel Michael Mumford, CSC

Australian Army

Abstract

This paper examines the impact of a real or perceived change in US military support to the security of South Korea by the Trump Administration. It does so by examining the statements made by President Trump both before and since his election, as well as the positions of the states involved, including China and North Korea. It also examines the likely responses by North Korea and South Korea, and the likelihood and effectiveness of China in influencing North Korean reactions.

The paper argues that North Korea looms large as a threat, exacerbated by uncertain policy indicators from the current US Administration. It contends that without unequivocal US support of South Korea, North Korean provocation will likely increase. It concludes that the US needs urgently to revisit its policy towards the Korean peninsula. Otherwise, the ambiguities of its 'America First Foreign Policy' will continue to facilitate North Korea's strategic aims, weaken the security position of South Korea and, ultimately, increase the likelihood of conflict.

Introduction

More than any other recent administration, President Trump's election has brought significant security uncertainty into the Indo-Pacific region. This is especially evident on the Korean peninsula where the fragile security situation between the Republic of Korea (South Korea) and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea) is under increasing strain. Indeed, the respected Russian commentator Andrei Lankov recently reached the alarming conclusion that conflict on the peninsula is now at its closest point since the 1960s.¹

During the US election campaign, while speaking to an increasingly insular electorate, then candidate Trump made several comments about withdrawing or changing the nature of US military support to South Korea.² This raised concern in the region, especially in South Korea, where a reduction in the US military presence is seen as likely to embolden an already provocative North Korea. China, however, has long been arguing for a reduction in the US military presence in the region, not least to soften North Korean aggression and enhance negotiation efforts to reduce North Korea's nuclear ambitions.

China has also been especially vocal in recent times against the deployment of US anti-ballistic missile defences to South Korea, calling it a dangerous adjustment to the balance of power in the region.³ It is possible, therefore, that the security situation on the Korean peninsula will change over the next four years, through either a real or perceived change in US military support to South Korea. This issue is very relevant given that North Korea's recent missile-related provocations and increasing nuclear capabilities are likely to be the first serious foreign policy test for the Trump Administration.

This paper will examine the impact of a real or perceived change in US military support to the security of South Korea by examining the statements made by President Trump both before and since his election, as well as the stated and assessed positions of the states involved, including China and North Korea. It will then examine the likely responses by North Korea and South Korea to any change, and the likelihood and effectiveness of China in influencing North Korean reactions. It will conclude with an assessment of the future security of South Korea.

US policy on South Korea

The US currently has 28,500 troops continuously deployed to South Korea. This the largest concentration of US forces outside a declared conflict zone—and it has been in place, in varying sizes, since the end of the Korean War.⁴ These troops are provided under the Mutual Defense Treaty between the US and South Korea, signed in October 1953, which provides for the defence of South Korea in the event of conflict emanating from external threats.⁵

However, the US appears to have several positions with respect to its alliance with South Korea. The 2015 US National Security Strategy, developed under the Obama Administration, states that the US 'will honour its treaty obligations to [defend] South Korea'.⁶ This policy gives no guidance with respect to undermining the North Korean regime or reducing its capacity beyond adherence to UN resolutions. But the US National Military Strategy, which is subordinate to the US National Security Strategy, states that the US will not just honour its obligations but 'strengthen its alliance' with South Korea.

Understandably, the Trump Administration has yet released few detailed policy documents. Its only foreign policy declaration, the 'America First Foreign Policy', asserts that 'the Trump Administration is committed to a foreign policy focused on American interests and American national security'.⁷ The emphasis of this document is on countering extremism, increasing the size of the US military, and the renegotiation of foreign trade deals in America's favour. It makes no mention of state-based threats or South Korea.

In contrast to this lack of official policy, there has been no shortage of unofficial statements on South Korea by the President himself. Over the last 12 months, he has made several comments, first as a presidential candidate, then President-elect, and more recently as President, some of which conflict with the extant 2015 strategies.

For example, during the election campaign, then candidate Trump declared in January 2016 that South Korea should be expected to pay for US military protection and questioned the value to the US in protecting South Korea, asserting that 'we get practically nothing for ... this. Why are we doing this?'⁸ Two months later, he said 'they [South Korea] have to protect themselves or they have to pay us'.⁹ When asked how South Korea should protect itself, he suggested it could possess its own nuclear capabilities for self-defence purposes.

During the first presidential debate in September 2016, then candidate Trump once again questioned the value of military support to South Korea when he stated that 'we defend South Korea.... [b]ut they do not pay us

what they should be paying us.... I say, who makes these [deals]?'¹⁰ Of course, it could be construed that these comments were merely election rhetoric. For example, in October 2016, Michael Flynn, then National Security Adviser-elect, reportedly told Japanese law-makers that campaign talk of withdrawal from the region was rhetoric for domestic audiences.¹¹ However, given that President Trump has not since retracted his comments, it is reasonable to conclude that he was, or is, considering a change to US military support arrangements.

Since assuming office, President Trump has made two specific statements on the issue. In his inauguration speech, he questioned the value in defending countries like South Korea at US expense, saying that 'we've defended other nations' borders while refusing to defend our own.... [b]ut that is the past'.¹² Eight days later, on 29 January 2017, the White House Press Office released the results of a meeting between President Trump and Acting President Hwang Kyo-Ahn of South Korea, asserting that President Trump had reiterated an 'ironclad commitment' to defend South Korea.¹³

So, within a 12-month period, President (or candidate) Trump has implied or stated four possible policies: a reduction of US military forces in South Korea; self-reliance by South Korea through nuclear proliferation; mercenary defence by the US through full-cost recovery; and an 'ironclad commitment' by the US. Over that same time, the official stance of the US Government has been either treaty adherence or security enhancement, depending on the source of the policy. Such ambiguity and a 'more transactional US approach to alliance politics' could undermine confidence in future regional stability.¹⁴ It is unsurprisingly, therefore, that regional countries are wary of the actual nature of future US support to South Korea.

The task of achieving clarity by US policy makers has been made even more difficult by the increasingly belligerent North Korean ballistic-missile testing program. On this matter, President Trump was both unequivocal and cryptic when he said in January 2017 that North Korea's ICBM [inter-continental ballistic missile] capability 'won't happen'.¹⁵ North Korea responded by testing its Pukguksong-2 medium-range missile only two weeks later. The US relationship with South Korea is also made more difficult as a result of the political instability created by South Korea's President being impeached in December 2016 on allegations of cronyism and corruption.¹⁶ This has made generous statements in support of the South Korean government a fraught political exercise for any foreign government.

Korean reactions

Beginning in 1998, South Korea's so-called 'Sunshine Policy' called for peaceful co-existence with North Korea.¹⁷ This approach of enhanced dialogue culminated in a meeting between the two Koreas in 2000 to discuss possible unification. At the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games, both nations' athletes also marched in the Opening Ceremony under a 'unification banner'. However, there were suspicions at the time that North Korea was being conciliatory simply to mask its covert nuclear program.¹⁸ The election in 2008 of a conservative government in South Korea saw a cautious retreat from the 'Sunshine Policy', which then degraded significantly. Relations between the two Koreas have remained frosty ever since.¹⁹

South Korea's response to an actual or perceived change in US military support is likely to include increased militarisation. In December 2016, Jane's reported an increase in the development of independent military capabilities in South Korea, which is a possible reaction to the threat of an 'America First' approach.²⁰ Additionally, South Korea has asked the US for a deployment of Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) systems. The reasons for this are ostensibly defensive but, for the South Koreans, it is even more important as a tangible statement of continued US military support.²¹

China has been steadfastly opposed to this deployment, with commentary by China's state news agency calling the deployment 'a threat to regional security and stability ... [that will] undermine the regional strategic balance' and pose a threat to China's interests.²² There is also now open and regular debate in South Korea about the need for its own nuclear capability.²³ Whether this debate is in response to President Trump's statements, where he has indicated a willingness to consider the proliferation of nuclear weapons to South Korea and Japan to balance North Korea and China, is unknown but would seem a likely corollary.

For its part, the aims of North Korea are difficult to judge for reasons that are not widely agreed by observers but typically relate to regime irrationality or clever international calculation. Unification has been a previously stated aim of the regime, although it is unclear whether this was just for domestic audiences or is a genuine regime ambition. Whatever its intentions, since the assumption of power by Kim Jong-un in late 2011, North Korea has become increasingly isolated and therefore increasingly unknowable.

On 29 February 2012, just months into his tenure as Supreme Leader, Kim Jong-un agreed to the joint US-North Korea 'Leap Day Agreement' to suspend missile testing in exchange for food aid. However, only two months

later, North Korea recommenced missile test launches, resulting in cancellation of the US aid program and the cessation of official dialogue between the two nations. Since that time, analysts assess that North Korea has accumulated enough nuclear-weapons material for up to 30 devices and has mastered low accuracy short- and medium-range missile systems.²⁴

Most commentators agree that, even if emboldened by both South Korean political chaos and the Trump Administration's mixed messages, a North Korean attempt at unification by force is unlikely.²⁵ What is likely is that North Korea will use the uncertainty and lack of international resolve to finalise its long-range nuclear weapons technology, which it sees as critical for regime continuance. This was demonstrated by Kim Jong-un's 2017 New Year's speech where he claimed that North Korea would become a 'military giant in the East'.²⁶

North Korea is also likely to use the tense security situation to further intensify Sino-US relations which, in turn, will make North Korea a more valuable part of China's geopolitical strategy.²⁷ Essentially, the more tense that relations become between China and the US, the more China needs a geographical buffer between it and US-allied South Korea and Japan. Therefore, it will be in North Korea's interest to exploit any real or perceived reduction in US military support through continued provocation until it has the means to guarantee regime survival from external threat via its nuclear capability.

Accordingly, commentators tend to espouse one of two options for the US to counter North Korean provocation. The first is very strong deterrence; the second is to improve US-Sino relations to remove the geostrategic value of North Korea. As Lyle Goldstein has contended, 'the answer isn't a stronger US-ROK alliance but an US-China partnership'.²⁸

Chinese interests and influence

Despite their sometimes-difficult history, China is far from antagonistic towards South Korea, becoming South Korea's largest trading partner in 2010 with 25 per cent of South Korea's total trade.²⁹ China's long-term view of the peninsula, therefore, would not appear to be a unified socialist Korea but rather a hegemonic one that provides a buffer against US-allied states.³⁰

China's worst-case scenario is regime collapse in North Korea resulting in mass refugees and a unified Korea under US influence from Seoul, although China's 2015 Defence White Paper is strangely silent on this.³¹ A Chinese Defense Ministry press briefing in February 2017 stated that 'China adheres to the maintenance of peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula, the realization of denuclearization, and the settlement of disputes through dialogue and consultation'.³² The subtext of this statement is that the continuance of the

North Korean regime is in China's interests so long as there are heightened tensions between China and the US and Japan.

In terms of China's influence over North Korea, it is noteworthy that Kim Jong-un is yet to visit China (or indeed any other country) after five years in power.³³ China provides two-thirds of all foreign trade with North Korea, yet appears to have little ability to influence its behaviour.³⁴ For example, following the February 2017 Pukguksong-2 missile launch, China implemented a ban on North Korean coal imports.³⁵ But less than three weeks later, North Korea fired a further four missiles. Such economic sanctions by China have been met with a degree of cynicism by some in the international community, as China in the past has compensated in other ways for punitive economic measures.³⁶ There are also questions about the effectiveness of these types of economic sanctions against North Korea in any case.³⁷ Nevertheless, the implementation of sanctions by China against North Korea is clear evidence of its increasing frustration.³⁸

The future of South Korean security

Strong US support to South Korea, and a complementary or discrete reduction in Sino-US competition, are the options most widely discussed in terms of mitigating the North Korean threat. However, the current Administration's ambiguity has assured neither, while at the same time there has been a seeming reduction in China's influence over North Korea.

The consequential impact on regional confidence is likely to embolden North Korea, which has a vested interest in the situation remaining tense to ensure its geostrategic value to China remains high until it fully develops its own nuclear arsenal. Moreover, while conflict on the Korean peninsula remains unlikely, South Korea is likely to militarise to offset any real or perceived US reductions, further adding pressure on the regional security environment.

Conclusion

The Korean peninsula is one of the key areas of potential major power conflict in the world. The situation is difficult to assess, let alone predict, due to the isolation of one of the prospective protagonists and the great power geopolitics that underline the region's security dynamics. North Korea looms large as a threat, and the situation is not made easier by uncertain policy indicators from the current US Administration. Fluid allegiances and transactional relationships may work well in the boardrooms of America, however, in the opaque politics of the Korean peninsula, they will only destabilise the region.

Without unequivocal US support of South Korea, it is likely that North Korean provocation will increase due to a combination of China's inability to

control the Kim Jong-un regime and China's fear that increased pressure on Pyongyang may destabilise what it sees as an essential geostrategic buffer. Yet even if the US attempts to undo the uncertain statements of the last 12 months by reinforcing its military support, such as the THAAD deployment and increased joint US-South Korea military activities, there is a risk that such actions will further draw the ire of China and give North Korea further pretext for provocation.

The US needs urgently to revisit its policy towards the Korean peninsula. Otherwise, the ambiguities of its 'America First Foreign Policy' will continue to facilitate North Korea's strategic aims, weaken the security position of South Korea and, ultimately, increase the likelihood of conflict.

Notes

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