

The Trump Effect on the Global Nuclear Order

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On 25 January 2018, the famous Doomsday Clock was moved to two minutes to midnight¹ – the closest it has ever been, matching the acute sense of crisis of 1953. Although it was not the only country blamed for the worsening situation, the United States featured prominently in the reasons for the backward movement. The list included upgrades in its nuclear arsenal; the lack of arms control negotiations with Russia; exchange of bellicose threats with North Korea; and doubts about its commitment to the Iran nuclear deal which were validated when President Donald Trump abandoned it on 8 May 2018.

The clock did not move in 2019. On the one hand, on 1 February Trump confirmed his October 2018 decision to suspend US participation in the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) – an arms control agreement with Russia that contributed to the end of the Cold War² – to worldwide criticism. On the other hand, in 2018 he dialled down his bellicose rhetoric against North Korea and has met its leader Kim Jong-un twice, in Singapore last year and again in Hanoi on 27–28 February. Although the latter was a failure, the US and North Korea, as also South and North Korea, are now engaged in summit, high and working level discussions, and the fear of an imminent war has faded.

US actions under Trump have contributed to the deepening unease about the steadily increasing nuclearization of world affairs in this century. We are in the midst of a uniquely dangerous period in the atomic age. Geopolitical tensions have spiked across the world. No arms control negotiations are currently underway to reduce global nuclear stockpiles. A hostile security environment, proliferation of nuclear weapons, and emergence of new technologies have increased the risk of accidental or deliberate use of nuclear weapons. For the first time in history there are two international treaties for setting global nuclear policy directions and norms: the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and the Nuclear-Weapon Prohibition Treaty (TPNW).

President Trump's narcissistic personality, abrasive style and disdain for international

institutions and rules have established him as the disruptor-in-chief of the global order, including the existing nuclear order. US nuclear policies both reflect and fuel the fraying regimes, provoking counter-measures by adversaries, sowing doubts in allies, and stiffening support among the non-nuclear states for the TPNW.

The 2018 Nuclear Posture Review³ (NPR) will shape the Trump administration's nuclear decision-making, modernization, targeting and signalling. Its vision of the role of nuclear weapons is expansive. The fourfold effect of the NPR is to enlarge the US nuclear arsenal, lower the threshold for the use of nuclear weapons, and broaden the circumstances and contingencies in which the threat of nuclear weapons can be made as tools of diplomatic coercion. The altered US nuclear posture will inevitably have cascading effects on the arsenals, doctrines, and deployment practices of the other nuclear-armed states and also on the nuclear policies, including the balance of incentives and disincentives between non-possession and proliferation, of many of the non-nuclear weapon states.

This article examines the effect of the Trump administration's nuclear policies on four categories of states: the potential nuclear adversaries, in particular Russia and China; US allies that are dependent on the US nuclear umbrella for their own security; the two major countries of proliferation concern over the past decade, namely Iran and North Korea; and the non-nuclear weapon states who are outside the nuclear umbrella of the nine countries with the bomb (in alphabetical order, China, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea [DPRK], France, India, Israel, Pakistan, Russia, UK, and USA).

Potential Adversaries

On 1 March 2018, President Vladimir Putin boasted of a new array of invincible nuclear weapons⁴ that can penetrate any defences anywhere in the world. He noted that the US had not heeded Russian warnings when President George W. Bush pulled out of the 1972 anti-ballistic missile (ABM) treaty in 2002. "You didn't listen to our country then. Listen to us now⁵," he said. The language Putin

used in his address was reminiscent of the Cold War. After the US and Russian suspensions of the INF in 2019, Putin warned on 20 February⁶ that Russia could place hypersonic nuclear weapons on submarines deployed near US waters in order to match the timeframe in which US missiles based in Europe could strike Russia. He also warned of a radioactive tsunami that could be triggered in densely populated coastal areas by a new nuclear-powered underwater drone dubbed *the Poseidon*.

Meanwhile the official paper of the People's Liberation Army has called for China to strengthen its nuclear deterrence and counter-strike capabilities⁷ in order to match the developing US and Russian nuclear strategies. China is upgrading its considerably smaller nuclear arsenal. It has rejected Germany's request to save the INF⁸ by agreeing to trilateralize it, emphasizing that its warheads in the hundreds cannot be compared to the US and Russian arsenals in the several thousands each.

Expanding US and Russian nuclear weapons developments and deployments lead to the normalization of the discourse of nuclear weapons use. The more that Putin and Trump revalidate the role of nuclear weapons in strengthening their respective national security, the more they embolden calls of nuclear weapon acquisition in other countries. India and Pakistan are enlarging, and modernizing and upgrading stockpiles, while investing in battlefield tactical nuclear weapons and systems to counter them. Their sudden flare-up and aerial skirmishes at the end of February were a stark reminder of the stakes involved.

Umbrella States

The biggest spur to the unexpected and sudden debate on the merits of independent nuclear weapons among security specialists in America's European and Pacific allies, who hitherto have been content to rely on the protection of US nuclear weapons under policies of extended nuclear deterrence, has been Trump. His public scorn for and castigation of once-valued allies as unwanted burdens, plus his abandonment of core

Western values and interests on the altar of a purely self-serving transactional foreign policy that may be returning the US to the historical norm of isolationism, have been deeply unsettling. The net effect is to damage the major Western institutions and call into question US leadership as a responsible global power, the quality of US nuclear decision-making and its reliability as a nuclear guarantor.

This presents a double dilemma for America's allies. On the one hand, the mercurial Trump may provoke a nuclear war that destroys the world. On the other hand, a transactional president constantly berating his European and Pacific allies about not carrying enough of the budgetary and military burden for their own security may refuse to come to their defence should they be under attack from a nuclear-armed enemy.

The double dilemma in turn translates into contradictory policy implications. In response to concerns about the unreliability of the US nuclear umbrella under Trump, some political leaders and strategic analysts in some allies – Germany, South Korea, Japan, Australia – have begun to think the unthinkable about independent nuclear defence capability. There are still powerful constraints and arguments against an independent deterrent in each of these countries, but the fact that they have even begun to think of the possibility is due largely to the shock of Trump's policies.

Countries of Proliferation Concern

The 2015 Iran nuclear deal had established a robust dismantlement, transparency, inspections, and consequences regime. Trump pulled the US out of the deal on 8 May 2018 and reimposed sanctions on Iran on 5 November. With Iran still in compliance with its obligations, this puts the US in material breach of the multilaterally negotiated and UN-endorsed Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action⁹ (2015). This will have reconfirmed North Korea's belief that the one thing standing between its security and a US attack is the bomb. North Korean leaders have been strongly motivated to get the bomb because of the cruel fate that befell no-bomb Slobodan Milosevic (Serbia), Saddam Hussein (Iraq) and Muammar Gaddafi (Libya). They told Siegfried Hecker, a former director of the Los Alamos National Laboratory (1986–97)

that if these three leaders "had had nuclear weapons, their countries would not have been at the mercy of the Americans and their regime-change tactics."¹⁰

The Iran decision will also have reinforced every hardliner's conviction that the US cannot be trusted to deliver its end of an internationally negotiated deal. President Hassan Rouhani advised North Korea's foreign minister Ri Yong Ho, who was visiting Iran as the reimposed US sanctions came into effect, that Washington cannot be trusted to make and keep any nuclear deal that is reached¹¹. On 13 August, Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei rejected President Trump's offer of unconditional talks on the North Korean model. "America's withdrawal from the nuclear deal is a clear proof that America cannot be trusted," he said by way of explanation.

Meanwhile, after the 'historic' Singapore summit with Trump in June 2018 and Trump's 'Mission Accomplished' declaration that North Korea was no longer a nuclear threat¹², the latter gave multiple indications of just how unlikely complete denuclearization is. On 9 August, Foreign Minister Ri said: "we will preserve our nuclear science¹³ as we know that the Americans will not abandon their hostility toward us." Pyongyang has also demanded that the US must first declare that the Korean War is over before it provides detailed disclosure in writing of its nuclear-weapon stockpiles, production facilities and missiles as steps towards denuclearization.

For its part North Korea complains that it has taken many promised goodwill measures such as "practical denuclearisation steps as discontinuing nuclear test and ICBM test fire, followed by dismantling the nuclear test ground." In response, however, not only has Washington insisted on denuclearization first, it has also incited "international sanctions and pressure"¹⁴ contrary to expectations of lowering the high barrier of mistrust. South Korea's President Moon Jae-in would appear to have elevated the need to avoid a war on the Korean Peninsula that could easily cross the nuclear threshold, as his very top priority. He has persisted with deepening inter-Korean relations despite the flagging momentum of North Korea–US relations that culminated in the failed second summit in Hanoi on 27–28 February 2019.

The Non-Nuclear-Weapon States

The main drivers of the 2017 UN Nuclear Ban Treaty are the failure of the nuclear-weapon states to implement their nuclear disarmament obligation under Article VI of the NPT; the elevated nuclear threat levels over the last five-six years from Europe through the Middle East and South Asia to the Korean Peninsula and East Asia; the fraying nuclear arms control regimes; and growing awareness of the humanitarian consequences of any nuclear-weapon use, whether by choice or accident. Although the primary intended impact of the Ban Treaty is normative¹⁵ rather than operational, it has been fiercely resisted by all the nuclear-armed states. They are in denial on their own responsibility for interest in the treaty and, led by the United States, reject the call to pursue nuclear disarmament anytime soon.

Endnotes

¹<https://thebulletin.org/2018-doomsday-clock-statement/>

²<https://theconversation.com/the-collapse-of-the-us-russia-inf-treaty-makes-arms-control-a-global-priority-111251>

³<https://dod.defense.gov/News/SpecialReports/2018NuclearPostureReview.aspx/>

⁴ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-43239331>

⁵<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/mar/01/vladimir-putin-threatens-arms-race-with-new-missiles-announcement>

⁶<http://time.com/5533297/putin-warns-us-missiles-europe/>

⁷<https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-china-security/chinese-military-paper-urges-increase-in-nuclear-deterrence-capabilities-idUKKBN1FJ1A1>

⁸<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-germany-security-china/china-rebuffs-germanys-call-for-us-missile-deal-with-russia-idUSKCN1Q50NZ>

⁹<https://www.state.gov/e/eb/tfs/spi/iran/jcpoa/>

¹⁰<http://thebulletin.org/iran-nuclear-option-more-trouble-it-was-worth9064>

¹¹<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-nuclear-northkorea/u-s-cant-be-trusted-irans-rouhani-tells-north-korea-idUSKBN1KU0NB>

¹²<https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/1006837823469735936?lang=en>

¹³https://www.ft.com/content/0733c85e-9c4f-11e8-9702-5946bae86e6d?mkt_tok=eyJpIjoiT1dObFl6UTJZVEppWxprdyIsInQiOiJQTUVjQmRmZTVHVi0E1d1BO0TNNd251eVZoeWhDbn1rMTgzU2QxU3FCVFBJSFgWmM5VWE1vV1JjcEQ0enM2dFNmQ3ZxYzIjZDQwK1wdfnldz3Q1N1bXlqSFZnYjA1NFridkzJnps0JwY0F0Vkl2lHXC9VWFlkQWhtKNVjN29xbyJ9

¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0163660X.2017.1406709>

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