Syria, Iran and N. Korea: Will Trump Attempt to Finish the Neocon Hitlist?

In Donald Trump’s short time in office, he has already shown his propensity to use military force. From dropping the largest non-nuclear bomb ever used on Afghanistan, to launching 59 Tomahawk cruise missiles at Iraq (oh wait, Syria), there is no doubt that the Trump administration has a prominent militaristic streak.

But is this just for starters? If Trump stays in power for the duration of his term, is there a major war, or even multiple wars, on the horizon? Judging by the rhetoric and actions already taken by the Trump administration, it will be a miracle if the US does not start a major war in the near future. Coincidentally, the main countries in the sights of the Trump administration just happen to be the three countries that the neoconservatives pinpointed for regime change 17 years ago, but have not yet been dealt with.

1997 marked the birth of the Project for the New American Century (PNAC), a neoconservative think tank of catastrophic proportions. It was founded by William Kristol, the longtime editor of the Weekly Standard, who also served as the chief of staff to Vice President Dan Quayle, and Robert Kagan, a former State Department official who is now a Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institute. A long list of neocons belonged to the group, including Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld and Paul Wolfowitz.

PNAC’s stated objectives included the desire to “shape a new century favourable to American principles and interests,” “increase defense spending significantly,” and challenge “regimes hostile to US interests and values.” In September 2000, the PNAC group released a report titled: ‘Rebuilding America’s Defenses – Strategy, Forces and Resources for a New Century.’ The introduction to the report clearly expressed PNAC’s desire to maintain US supremacy in the world:

“At present, the United States faces no global rival. America’s grand strategy should aim to preserve and extend this advantageous position as far into the future as possible...Preserving the desirable strategic situation in which the United States now finds itself requires a globally preeminent military capability both today and in the future.”

In order to maintain this supremacy, the report called for the Defense Department to be at the forefront of experimenting with transformative technologies, a move that would require a dramatic increase in defense spending.

Curiously, the report – published one year prior to 9/11 - argued that this transformation would likely be a “long one” unless an event on the scale of “Pearl Harbor” occurred:

“To preserve American military preeminence in the coming decades, the Department of Defense must move more aggressively to experiment with new technologies and operational concepts, and seek to exploit the emerging revolution in military affairs... The effects of this military transformation will have
profound implications for how wars are fought, what kinds of weapons will dominate the battlefield and, inevitably, which nations enjoy military preeminence.

The Pentagon [however], constrained by limited budgets and pressing current missions, has seen funding for experimentation and transformation crowded out in recent years. Spending on military research and development has been reduced dramatically over the past decade... Any serious effort at transformation must occur within the larger framework of U.S. national security strategy, military missions and defense budgets... The process of transformation, even if it brings revolutionary change, is likely to be a long one, absent some catastrophic and catalyzing event – like a new Pearl Harbor (p.50-p.51).

Under the guise of missile capability, the report then pinpointed five countries that the neocons, in conjunction with the CIA, considered “deeply hostile” to the US:

“Ever since the Persian Gulf War of 1991... the value of the ballistic missile has been clear to America’s adversaries. When their missiles are tipped with warheads carrying nuclear, biological, or chemical weapons, even weak regional powers have a credible deterrent, regardless of the balance of conventional forces. That is why, according to the CIA, a number of regimes deeply hostile to America - North Korea, Iraq, Iran, Libya and Syria – ‘already have or are developing ballistic missiles’ that could threaten U.S allies and forces abroad. And one, North Korea, is on the verge of deploying missiles that can hit the American homeland. Such capabilities pose a grave challenge to the American peace and the military power that preserves that peace” (p.51-p.52).

This report was published approximately three years prior to the invasion of Iraq, and approximately 11 years prior to both the war in Libya and the start of the proxy war in Syria. The central point I am getting at here is that the wars we have seen unfold, and the wars to come, are not just short-term actions taken by the administration who happens to be in power at that particular time. They are planned years and sometimes decades prior to the first shot being fired. Regardless of which party the President belongs to – George Bush invaded Iraq with a blue tie on, whilst Barack Obama bombed Libya with a red one on – the same regime-change-agenda continues.

**Two Down, Three to Go**

Although there were other reports that marked more countries that the neocons considered ‘hostile’ to the US, or more accurately, hostile to US (Western) imperial ambitions, the September 2000 report focused on five countries. With Iraq and Libya already ‘liberated,’ three countries are still on the hitlist: Syria, Iran and North Korea. Coincidentally (or not), these are some of the main countries that the Trump administration is targeting, and we are only a few months into Trump’s reign.

**Syria:** Trump has already bombed Syrian government forces - or forces fighting on the side of the Syrian government - on multiple occasions since being elected. After Trump bombed Syria back in April, both Kagan and Kristol praised him, yet demanded more blood. Even though they claimed not to be major supporters of Trump during the campaign, many Bush-era hawks were - including Rumsfeld, the former Defense Secretary. The Trump administration has also admitted sending hundreds of US troops - which includes Marines - into Syria, officially in order to fight against ISIS (through training and advising rebel forces), yet it’s clear the move has as much to do with the Syrian and Iranian governments than anything else.

**Iran:** Throughout Trump’s campaign for the White House, he repeatedly criticized both Iran and North Korea. Trump has always been a severe critic of the Iranian nuclear deal, and a loyal supporter of the state of Israel, meaning war with Iran seems more probable that not. In fact, Iran has claimed that Trump and Saudi Arabia are behind the recent terror attacks in Tehran, which ISIS has claimed responsibility for.

During his trip to Saudi Arabia last month, Trump took the opportunity to take another jab at Iran. In February, the US Defence Secretary, James “Mad Dog” Mattis, called Iran the “biggest state sponsor of terrorism in the world,” completely ignoring the role Saudi Arabia plays in exporting terrorism. It appears as though the Trump administration is in the process of deciding which path to Persia it thinks is going to be the most effective.

**North Korea:** In relation to North Korea, the Trump administration has essentially backed the country into a corner,
producing the obvious response from North Korea: an (attempted) show of strength. A country that the US carpet bombed during the Korean war - which included using napalm - it hardly seems likely that North Korea is just going to give in to US threats, considering the resentment many in the country still feel towards America.

This is not a defense of North Korea, but the Trump administration making one provocative statement after another has hardly reduced tensions in the region. In March, Mattissaid that “reckless” North Korea has “got to be stopped.” The following month, Trump said North Korea is a problem that “will be taken care of.” Although Mattis has acknowledged that a conflict with North Korea would be “catastrophic,” the Trump administration appears to be willing to ratchet up tensions regardless.

In contrast, both Russia and China have emphasised that dialogue and diplomacy trump threats. Speaking in May, the Russian President, Vladimir Putin, said that “we have to stop intimidating North Korea” and “return to dialogue” with them, after affirming that Russia “is against expanding the pool of nuclear powers, including North Korea.” Also in May, the Chinese Foreign Ministry called for the US and North Korea to “stop irritating each other,” and advocated “dialogue and negotiation.”

It also important to note that the North Korean issue is really about a lot more than just North Korea. As Paul Craig Roberts has highlighted, the North Korean ‘crisis’ has everything to do with Russia and China. Similar to how the US used the Iranian ‘threat’ to put anti-ballistic missile systems close to Russia’s borders, the North Korean crisis can be used to deploy anti-ballistic missiles systems next to the eastern borders of Russia and China. In a positive development however, the South Korean government has just announced (at the time of writing anyway) that it will halt the deployment of the US anti-ballistic missile system – known as the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) – on its territory for potentially up to a year, citing environmental concerns.

If the Trump administration and the neocons are actually reckless enough to try and force regime change in all three countries in the near future, this brings the US into direct confrontation with both Russia and China. And if a hot war between these three nuclear powers erupts, this would mark the end of human civilization as we know it.

**Steven MacMillan is an independent writer, researcher, geopolitical analyst and editor of The Analyst Report, especially for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”**.