

Global Security Briefing – June 2018

The Kim/Trump Summit and Implications for Iran

Paul Rogers

Summary

Donald Trump's esoteric approach to diplomacy produced surprising outcomes at his June summit with Kim Jong-Un in Singapore. Unlike Pyongyang and Seoul, Trump does not yet seem to understand the consequences of his Korea policy. Or perhaps he is prepared to laud any deal so long as it is his deal. In response, Iranian hardliners have made a surprising move on ballistic missiles, potentially signalling that they fancy their chances in bilateral negotiations with the great American deal-maker.

Introduction

The 12 June US/North Korea Summit in Singapore has evoked mixed reactions but an early result was a palpable reduction in tension in North East Asia. Whether this will last will depend more on Trump than Kim, but it does not significantly diminish the risk of a separate US/Israeli confrontation with Iran. Following last month's assessment of the potential for such a war, this briefing examines that risk in the wake of the Singapore meeting. This focuses, in part, on political differences in Iran about the appropriate response to the United States withdrawal from the 2015 multinational nuclear agreement.

After Singapore

The occasion of the summit had two immediate and positive consequences. One was announced just before the meeting and was the North Korean decision to close a nuclear test site which would probably be subject to independent verification. The other was a decision by Mr Trump to halt joint military exercises with South Korea. While that decision caused consternation in Japan and in military circles in the United States, concern among the South Korean military was tempered by the continuing popularity of the South Korean government in its commitment to improved relations with the North.

President Trump viewed the summit as proof positive of his abilities as a deal-maker, with his more committed supporters seeing it as worthy of the Nobel Peace Prize. Indeed, his own post-summit communications showed that he thought that his allies were not prepared sufficiently to recognise his achievement.

A more detached analysis suggests that the primary beneficiary was actually Kim Jong-Un. In the space of just four months he succeeded in stimulating a rapprochement with South Korea through the Winter Olympics, made two visits to the South to meet President Moon Jae-In, and then followed this with a face-to-face meeting with Trump. He combined this with two visits to the Chinese leadership and high-level contacts with Russia, the latter likely to include a direct meeting with President Putin later this year.

While he agreed to progressive denuclearisation, no timescale was set and the very success of the summit and his global engagement meant that it was highly unlikely that sanctions against the country would be maintained at the current high level. Above all, he

was able to present a small and highly isolated autocracy as a major player on the world stage and, in diplomatic terms at least, an equal of the United States.

Dealing with Iran

It is likely that, in time, Mr Trump will come to recognise that he was not the deal-maker as he had supposed and that his opponent set the agenda. That, in turn, has implications for handling the Iran issue. Iran does not have nuclear weapons but there is evidence that it has in the past taken steps in that direction. The 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was therefore designed to prevent any further developments and was agreed by Iran and the United States, Russia, China, France, Germany and the UK. Trump's withdrawal was greeted with dismay and not a little anger by the other participating governments but was strongly supported by Israel and Saudi Arabia as well as by much of Trump's domestic constituency.

Israel under Netanyahu regards Iran as a potential existential threat and many of Trump's supporters share this view while also being strongly antagonistic to Iran's increased influence in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria and Yemen. At some stage in the coming months an escalating crisis is highly likely and what may determine the level of danger will be attitudes within Iran itself.

With a growing population of around 80 million, Iran has substantial economic problems that are particularly frustrating, especially for millions of its younger citizens, and it also has major internal political difficulties concerning foreign and security policy. The government of President Rouhani is intent on maintaining the security of the state but is also supportive of improving political and economic connections with Western states, seeing this as essential in responding to domestic aspirations.

The Trump administration, on the other hand, has made its position on Iran clear. In a 21 May speech at the Heritage Foundation in Washington the incoming Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, set out twelve actions that Iran had to take to satisfy the United States, the most significant being withdrawal from Syria, ending support for Hamas and Hezbollah and ceasing the further development of medium and intermediate range ballistic missiles.

In spite of considerable demands, there are some among Rouhani's supporters who advocate direct negotiations with the United States without precondition but this is strongly opposed by the commanders of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). In the nearly forty years since the revolutionary overthrow of the Shah's regime, the IRGC has seen itself as the true protector of the revolution and has been at the forefront of Iran's foreign involvements in Syria, Iran, Yemen and elsewhere and, crucially, its ballistic missile programme.

While the IRGC had reluctantly accepted the JCPOA agreement, seeing the negotiations that resulted in this as exceptional, its leadership is opposed to new negotiations with Washington on any of the substantive issues. In this it has the support of the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, who holds the power in matters of foreign policy. This would seem to reduce prospects for a negotiated settlement to the current Washington/Tehran dispute, but there is one interesting sign of flexibility concerning the ballistic missile programme.

One of the main concerns among military analysts in the United States is that Iran is intent on extending the capabilities of its medium range missiles beyond 2,000 km

(1,240 miles – sufficient to reach Israel and all of Arabia but not Western Europe or China, let alone the Western hemisphere) towards an intercontinental capability. If this was combined under a future hard-line leadership in Tehran with the sudden development of nuclear weapons it would have serious implications for US power in the region.

Whether this is a realistic fear, the missiles are far more psychologically significant for Iran than is commonly realised in Western states. This is partly down to the missile capabilities of Israel, with its Jericho missile force and even Saudi Arabia with its ageing force of Chinese DF-3 and newer DF-21 missiles. It is even more affected by the experience of the “war of the cities” in the 1980-88 war with Iraq when Tehran and other cities were hit many times by Scud ballistic missiles and strike aircraft, killing thousands of Iranian civilians.

It is in this context that a post-Singapore statement by the IRGC commander, Major General Mohammad Ali Jafari, is highly relevant when he said that the range of Iran’s existing missiles was sufficient for the defence of the country and that there were no plans to extend the range further. In the circumstances this is, to say the least, unexpected.

Conclusion

While we are in the early stages of post-Singapore trends this statement is relevant in determining how the Iranian government will approach its future relations with Washington. The political symbolism of the IRGC decision, even if it can easily be changed, is that Iran is prepared to engage in discussions on the JCPOA and its future, knowing that any concessions will be welcomed by the other parties to the agreement. This, in turn, will make it more difficult for the United States and Israel to engage in any direct use of force.

It is by no means impossible that we may yet see Tehran as effective as Pyongyang in dealing with the Trump administration, with President Trump, “the great deal-maker”, finding it less easy to handle the world of international diplomacy than he might have expected.

About the Author

Paul Rogers is Global Security Consultant to Oxford Research Group and Professor of Peace Studies at the University of Bradford. His [‘Monthly Global Security Briefings’](#) are available from our website. His latest book *Irregular War: ISIS and the New Threats from the Margins* was published by I B Tauris in June 2016. These briefings are circulated free of charge for non-profit use, but please **consider making a donation to ORG**, if you are able to do so.

Copyright © Oxford Research Group 2018.

Some rights reserved. This briefing is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs