



What would Reagan do on Terrorism, North Korea and Russia?

Dr. Jiri Valenta and Leni Friedman Valenta

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: “Intra-state strategic competition [with Russia and China], not terrorism, is the primary concern of US national security,” posits the DOD 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS). But how justified is this focus shift from the ongoing fight against Islamist terrorism? And can Moscow and Beijing’s interest in defeating this common enemy be harnessed to this fight? Exploring President Reagan’s policies to terrorism and intra-state competition can provide some useful clues.

With the destruction of the ISIS caliphate in Syria and Iraq, the US and its allies won an important battle, but not the global war. Many ISIS survivors have deployed elsewhere - from Yemen, to Sinai, to Libya - while the vacuum left by the organization’s downfall is being rapidly filled by al-Qaeda and its affiliates. In Afghanistan, the Taliban, al-Qaeda and other terrorist organizations control some 70 percent of the country’s territory, hardly the consolidation of US “gains in Afghanistan” claimed by the 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS).

Meanwhile, the survival of North Korea’s WMD arsenal, and its continued defiance of the international community, bolster the anti-US network of terrorist rogue regimes - above all Iran and its Hezbollah proxy. To countries near US shores, like Nicaragua and Grenada before the 1983 US Invasion, Pyongyang committed the largest military resources after Moscow. In Syria, it helped the Assad regime build a nuclear reactor, only to have it destroyed by Israel in September 2007.

Given this lasting terrorist threat, and the growing geopolitical challenges from Russia and China, President Donald Trump might benefit from consulting the statecraft of the late president, Ronald Reagan.

As the eminent historian and former Reagan adviser Richard Pipes explained, the president “instinctively understood what all great statesmen do, what matters and what does not, what is right and what wrong for his country. This quality cannot be taught; like perfect pitch one is born with it.” History appears to have borne this out.

In 1986, US intelligence viewed Libyan dictator Muammar Qaddafi as the terrorist linchpin in both the Middle East and Western Europe, even supporting the IRA. On April 6, Libyan agents bombed a West Berlin discotheque, frequented by US servicemen. The large casualties firmed Reagan’s decision to respond with massive force (two navy aircraft carriers, 100 fighters and bombers), against the calls by NATO allies for more negotiations and sanctions. Some NATO members even denied the US Air Force overfly rights.

Going it alone, Reagan launched a surprise attack on Libyan military targets and command centers - *Operation El Dorado Canyon* - aimed at taking out Qaddafi and his military leadership. The dictator survived, but he never recovered from the attack that humiliated him and destroyed his air defenses. For some time he found solace in R&D of WMD. Yet even this last hope sputtered in 2001 with receipt of an ultimatum from President George W. Bush. In December 2003, fearful of following in the footsteps of the freshly deposed Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein, Qaddafi gave up his WMD program.

Thereafter, as a secular leader, Qaddafi began to work with the US against Libya’s al-Qaeda Islamists. However, these moves did not protect him from a 2011 NATO intervention, orchestrated by French President Nicolas Sarkozy, British Prime Minister David Cameron, and US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. Qaddafi’s subsequent murder by U.S.-armed Libyan rebels, and Saddam’s earlier execution, stiffened Pyongyang’s belief that it must never give up its WMD - the guarantee of the regime’s survival.

Defense Secretary James Mattis has recently hinted at a viable US military North Korea option that “would not leave Seoul at risk of devastating retaliatory strikes.” Undoubtedly, Pyongyang will be a riskier and much more demanding operation than Reagan’s El Dorado. Yet Kim Jong-Un is not suicidal. If his own

life and the lives of his family, as well as his comfortable retirement, can be guaranteed, might not he give up his WMD in the face of an imminent massive strike?

Kim must not be allowed to perfect his delivery systems, threaten the US and its allies with his missiles, and bolster worldwide terrorism by his brazen example. Dangerous though it is, a Reaganesque decapitation of the totalitarian Pyongyang regime can prevent worse catastrophe later, including subsequent nuclear proliferation in the Middle East.

The 2018 NDS aptly pointed to Russia's military interventions in Georgia, Crimea and Ukraine, as well as to China's creating man-made islands as military outposts in the Pacific. All these were serious affronts to existing world order. But how likely are new Putin interventions, say in NATO's Baltic states? As posited by Czech president Milos Zeman, who knows Putin well, they are most unlikely: "Putin is not suicidal."

Trump surely knows that Reagan, like him, embarked on a massive military buildup, aimed at deterring Russia's geopolitical ambitions. And, like Reagan, he aims eventually at a discreet opening to Moscow. To the chagrin of his hardliners, Reagan wrote personal letters to three consecutive, dying Russian leaders. Finally, with healthy Gorbachev, he found the path to genuine partnership. "Some of the N.S.C. Staff are too hard line & don't think any approach should be made to the Soviets," Reagan recorded in his diary on April 6, 1983, amidst this process. "I think I'm hardliner & never will appease but I do want to try & let them see there is a better world if they'll show *by deed* they want to go along with the free world" (emphasis in the original).

Trump must be aware that economic stagnation wrought by the Western sanctions has made a new nuclear arms race prohibitively costly for Moscow, but also for the US. He also knows that Russia suffers terrorist attacks by Islamists from the Caucasus and Central Asia. Yet the president has an Achilles heel that Reagan did not have: his inability to admit any serious misjudgments. For over a year, he repeatedly dismissed Russia's interference in the US elections as a hoax.

As the evidence now seems incontrovertible, he could learn from Reagan's handling of his major scandal - the 1986 Iran-Contragate. Initially, the president denied that the US had illegally supplied arms to rogue state Iran for releasing American hostages. After a period of denials, however, Reagan, unlike Nixon in

Watergate, owned up to the truth. With the recent indictment of 13 Russians and a few Russian institutions for election rigging, Trump must find Reagan's inner strength to stop denying the undeniable.

Taking the long view, however, the administration should realize that neither the US, nor Russia, nor China can likely prevail alone in the global war on Islamic terrorism. To win in Afghanistan and stabilize Syria, Washington must sooner or later explore new opportunities for limited partnership with Moscow and Beijing. Should these powers demonstrate real seriousness of intention – the administration must seize the moment.

The decisive factor in the coming months, however, will be Trump's success or failure in cutting the North Korean Gordian knot. Only then can he demonstrate if he possesses the "imponderable" quality of political judgment that Ronald Reagan had.

Dr Jiri Valenta is a non-residential Senior Research Associate with BESA. He and his wife, Leni, are the Institute of Post-Communist Studies and Terrorism's principals, in Miami (jvlv.net) for the last decade. Jiri is coauthor (with Norman Podhoretz and William Maynes) of "[Terrorism, Reagan's Response](#)" (University of Miami, 1986).