



By: TA | AP Insight

The US attack on Iran is changing security assessments in the Far East



On June 21, US forces attacked Iran's nuclear targets, sending an important message to its rivals in the Far East, China and North Korea. Accustomed to President Trump as a risk-averse leader, they will have to make new assessments of possible American involvement in their region after the action in Iran.

President Donald Trump campaigned on keeping the United States out of foreign wars, but it didn't take long to convince him to come to the direct aid of Israel, **hitting** Iranian nuclear targets with bunker-buster bombs dropped by B-2 stealth bombers and Tomahawk cruise missiles fired from a submarine.

Beyond the attack's immediate impact on helping bring the 12-day war to a **close**, experts say Trump's decision to use force against another country also will certainly be reverberating in the Asia-Pacific, Washington's priority theater.

"Trump's strikes on Iran show that he's not afraid to use military force — this would send a clear message to North Korea, and even to China and Russia, about Trump's style," said Duyeon Kim, a senior analyst at the Center for a New American Security based in Seoul, South Korea.

"Before the strikes, Pyongyang and Beijing might have assumed that Trump is risk averse, particularly based on his behavior his first presidency despite some tough talk," Kim said.

China, North Korea and Russia all condemn US strike

Ten days into the war between Israel and Iran, Trump made the risky decision to step in, hitting three nuclear sites with American firepower on June 22 in a bid to destroy the country's nuclear program at a time while negotiations between Washington and Tehran were still ongoing.

The attacks prompted a pro forma Iranian retaliatory strike the following day on a U.S.

base in nearby Qatar, which caused no casualties, and both Iran and Israel then agreed to a **ceasefire** on June 24.

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North Korea, China and Russia all were quick to condemn the American attack, with Russian President Vladimir Putin calling it "unprovoked aggression," China's Foreign Ministry saying it violated international law and "exacerbated tensions in the Middle East," and North Korea's Foreign Ministry maintaining it "trampled down the territorial integrity and security interests of a sovereign state."

While the strikes were a clear tactical success, the jury is still out on whether they will have a more broad strategic benefit to Washington's goals in the Middle East or **convince** Iran it needs to work harder than ever to develop a nuclear deterrent, possibly pulling the U.S. back into a longer-term conflict.

US allies could see attack as positive sign for deterrence

If the attack remains a one-off strike, U.S. allies in the Asia-Pacific region likely will see the decision to become involved as a positive sign from Trump's administration, said Euan Graham, a senior defense analyst with the Australian Strategic Policy Institute.

"The U.S. strike on Iran will be regarded as net plus by Pacific allies if it is seen to reinforce red lines, restore deterrence and is of limited duration, so as not to pull the administration off-course from its stated priorities in the Indo-Pacific," he said. "China will take note that Trump is prepared to use force, at least opportunistically."

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In China, many who have seen Trump as having a “no-war mentality” will reassess that in the wake of the attacks, which were partially aimed at forcing Iran's hand in nuclear program negotiations, said Zhao Minghao, an international relations professor at China's Fudan University in Shanghai.

“The way the U.S. used power with its air attacks against Iran is something China needs to pay attention to,” he said. “How Trump used power to force negotiations has a significance for how China and the U.S. will interact in the future.”

But, he said, Washington should not think it can employ the same strategy with Beijing.

“If a conflict breaks out between China and the U.S., it may be difficult for the U.S. to withdraw as soon as possible, let alone withdraw unscathed,” he said.

China and North Korea present different challenges

Indeed, China and North Korea present very different challenges than Iran.

First and foremost, both already have nuclear weapons, raising the stakes of possible retaliation considerably in the event of any attack.

There also is no Asian equivalent of Israel, whose relentless attacks on Iranian missile defenses in the opening days of the war paved the way for the B-2 bombers to fly in and out without a shot being fired at them.

Still, the possibility of the U.S. becoming involved in a conflict involving either China or North Korea is a very real one, and Beijing and Pyongyang will almost certainly try to assess

what the notoriously unpredictable Trump would do.

North Korea will likely be “quite alarmed” at what Israel, with a relatively small but high-quality force, has been able to achieve over Iran, said Joseph Dempsey, a defense expert with the International Institute for Strategic Studies.

The U.S. decision to attack while still in talks with Iran will not go unnoticed

At the same time, it likely will be seen internally as justification for its own nuclear weapons program, “If Iran did have deployable nuclear weapons would this have occurred?” Dempsey said. “Probably not.”

The U.S. decision to attack while still in talks with Iran will also not go unnoticed, said Hong Min, a senior analyst at South Korea's Institute for National Unification.

“North Korea may conclude that dialogue, if done carelessly, could backfire by giving the United States a pretext for possible aggression,” he said.

“Instead of provoking the Trump administration, North Korea is more likely to take an even more passive stance toward negotiations with Washington, instead focusing on strengthening its internal military buildup and pursuing closer ties with Russia, narrowing the prospects for future talks,” he said.

China and Taiwan will draw lessons

China will look at the **attacks** through the visor of Taiwan, the self-governing democratic island off its coast that China claims as its own territory and President Xi Jinping has not ruled out taking by force.

The U.S. supplies Taiwan with weapons and is

one of its most important allies, though Washington's official policy on whether it would come to Taiwan's aid in the case of a conflict with China is known as "strategic ambiguity," meaning not committing to how it would respond.



Taiwan may try to take advantage of the American use of force against Iran to increase its deterrent situation versus the mainland

Militarily, the strike on Iran raises the question of whether the U.S. might show less restraint than has been expected by China in its response and hit targets on the Chinese mainland in the event of an invasion of Taiwan, said Drew Thompson, senior fellow with the Singapore-based think tank RSIS Rajaratnam School of International Studies.

It will also certainly underscore for Beijing the "difficulty of predicting Trump's actions," he said. "The U.S. airstrike on Iran's nuclear facilities caught many by surprise," Thompson said. "I think it demonstrated a tolerance and acceptance of risk in the Trump administration that is perhaps surprising."

It also gives rise to a concern that Taiwan's President Lai Ching-te, who in recent speeches has increased warnings about the threat from China, may be further emboldened in his rhetoric, said Lyle Goldstein, director of the Asia Program at the Washington-based foreign policy think tank Defense Priorities.

Already, Lai's words have prompted China to accuse him of pursuing Taiwanese independence, which is a red line for Beijing.

Goldstein said he worried Taiwan may try to

take advantage of the American "use of force against Iran to increase its deterrent situation versus the mainland."

"President Lai's series of recent speeches appear almost designed to set up a new cross-strait crisis, perhaps in the hopes of building more support in Washington and elsewhere around the Pacific," said Goldstein, who also is director of the China Initiative at Brown University's Watson Institute.

"I think that is an exceedingly risky gambit, to put it mildly," he said.