

North Korea Will Never Give Up Its Nuclear Weapons

WASHINGTON – The sudden White House announcement about a May Summit meeting between US President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un has taken Washington and the world by surprise. It is not clear what the American game plan is. Until not too long ago the U.S. policy regarding North Korea seemed to be sanctions, and more sanctions. No talks. In fact, Trump himself, a while ago publicly declared that negotiations would lead nowhere.

Trump “forced” Kim to negotiate?

Now, the improvised White House narrative is that Mr. Trump’s tough actions –the new round of sanctions, plus threats to destroy North Korea– have “forced” Kim to ask for direct talks which could entail “denuclearization”. If you believe all this, then it follows that Trump managed to bend North Korea.

Do not count on denuclearization

Still, beyond the surprise announcement of this May Summit, my assessment is that this opening, however startling and significant it may be, (it would be the very first such encounter between the leaders of these two nations, technically still at war with each other), it cannot possibly mean that the North Koreans are truly willing to negotiate the end of their nuclear program.

And for a very simple reason. North Korea is a semi-failed state in which most people are close to starvation. It has no real economy, and no prospect of creating a viable one under this medieval, cruel and bizarre dictatorship.

Korea has nuclear weapons –and nothing else

The only real asset that North Korea has is its nuclear weapons, now combined with an increasingly more modern panoply of ballistic missiles which may be capable within a short period of time to enable the rogue state to deliver nuclear weapons as far as the East Coast of the United States. America must take notice of North Korea for this very reason. Because it represents a potentially serious national security threat.

Well, precisely for this very reason, nuclear weapons being all that North Korea has to be taken seriously by the rest of the world, I cannot see any scenario under which Kim will give this huge –in fact only– real asset away. He will not, even if promised in return American technologies, food aid, substantial financial aid and all sorts of political reassurances that the US will sign a peace treaty, that America will never attack them, and what not.

Simply stated, North Korea's standing in the world, such as it is, is due only to its ability to threaten other countries with incredible destruction, including the United States. Without nuclear weapons, North Korea is like Sudan, or the Central African Republic: an inconsequential, impoverished state with no real future and no prospects.

What is the point of this May Summit?

I have no idea as to what Kim may have in mind by offering these talks with President Trump. Of course, if we just focus on the optics, to be face to face with the leader of the U.S. will be a huge public relations coup for Kim. He will be able to say that finally he is recognized as the supreme leader of a world power. However, when it comes to what a bilateral negotiation may bring, I am not too optimistic.

Kim will not give up his nuclear arsenal

America (and the world) wants North Korea to ultimately give

up its nuclear weapons, its missiles and all its nuclear facilities. But this is all they got. Even if promised a lot, the North Koreans will not give up their membership in the nuclear club.

How The NRA Controls The National Gun Control Debate

WASHINGTON – A new turn in the media narrative of the recent mass killing at a Florida High School may actually provide support to the National Rifle Association (NRA) argument. The NRA maintains that every law-abiding citizen has a constitutional right (deriving from the Second Amendment) to own a weapon. The killings that occur in America are all about bad people who get guns, while they should not be able to get them. In many instances, the NRA claims, the bad people are enabled by incompetent law enforcement agencies. Those who are supposed to enforce the existing law and protect us are negligent. And this is how tragedies happen.

CNN: how the police failed

Well, the outcome of a recent CNN interview with the Sheriff in charge of police operations in that Florida town seems to reinforce the NRA's main argument. It turns out that the police department, in agreement with the High School that was later on attacked, decided to be more lenient in enforcing the law when students commit some types of infractions, including threats.

This being the case, it is quite possible that the young Florida shooter, well known for his erratic behavior, fell through the cracks created by this softer approach to law

enforcement. And there is more. What about all the calls made by different people over a period of time alerting the police that this young man was probably up to no good? Why is it that nobody in the Sheriff's office followed up? And, finally, the truly stinging indictment. The police officer assigned to protect the school, carefully avoided getting into the school premises when the tragedy occurred and the shooting began. It seems that he cared for his life a lot more than for the lives of the kids he was supposed to protect.

Blame the police

So, there you have it. What viewers get from the CNN story is that if the local police had been proactive and if everybody had done their duty, this deranged young man would not have had the opportunity to get a gun and eventually execute his crazy plan.

CNN has a point, here. However, please note that this is exactly the NRA's point. The NRA claims that If only good people get guns and the bad guys are caught before they can act, then nothing bad can possibly happen.

NRA solution

However, if the authorities whose job is to protect us sleep on the job and allow bad people to have access to weapons, then we have a system breakdown and tragedies like this one unfortunately may occur. The NRA "solution"? Very simple. Enforce the law, follow establish protocols, and nothing this bad will happen again.

Of course we know this is a compete self-serving fantasy. In a country –America– in which tens of millions of legally owned guns freely circulate it is almost a miracle that these tragedies do not occur more frequently.

Police negligence in the Florida shooting case

In this particular Florida case, let us readily admit that many officials repeatedly dropped the ball. Tips were ignored. Dangerous behavior exhibited by this young man was either ignored or explained away. Proper protocols were not followed. The police did not act when it had to, and so on. All this is true.

Therefore, we can stipulate that in this particular case the tragedy might have been avoided. Human error, at multiple stages, was a factor, may be the key factor, in this mass murder episode.

The true issue: too many guns in America

That said, if we look at the larger picture, it is almost impossible to police a country of 320 million people in which tens of millions of citizens own guns, while untold numbers of weapons are readily available through illegal channels to those who cannot purchase one legally.

Furthermore, how do we screen everybody for mental issues, in order to make sure that all or most mentally disturbed people will not be allowed to buy or keep a gun? Of course, better screening may help at least in some cases. It is probably true that some future tragedies may be avoided.

But the real and carefully ignored larger issue is the bizarre interpretation now given by the Courts to the meaning of the Second Amendment. In essence, here it is:

“Anybody in America can get as many guns as they wish, because gun ownership is an individual right protected by the U.S. Constitution. End of story”.

No other developed country has a regime of unrestricted gun ownership

America is the only rich, developed democracy in which there are only minimal barriers to gun ownership. This is not an

element of distinction which makes this country better. This is a bizarre anomaly. Until we recognize this fact, do not expect much real, as opposed to cosmetic, progress on “gun control”.

And the NRA controls the narrative.

Syria Is Not A Strategic Priority For Washington

WASHINGTON – It is clear that Russia, as the key ally of president Assad of Syria, has taken a lead role in trying to set the stage for a final peace settlement regarding this tragically battered country. The recent Sochi meeting in which president Putin hosted president Rouhani of Iran and president Erdogan of Turkey seems to illustrate a resurgent Russia once again playing a key role in the Middle East.

America in retreat?

In Washington, the defenders of the (frankly defunct) myth of Pax Americana sounded alarm bells. *“America is in full retreat –they admonish us– and the bad guys are filling the void. We are losing ground, while they are gaining”.*

Indeed. But here is the question. Is the American national interest really profoundly impacted by who is in control in Syria? What’s so important about Syria from Washington’s standpoint? Well, very little. Sure enough, is we look at a map of the Middle East, we can see that a firm Russian foothold into Syria, plus continuing Iranian influence there, changes the geopolitical picture.

Russia and Iran in the lead

True. Still, this being the case, in what way does this geopolitical realignment affect America's vital interests? Syria is now a semi-destroyed and completely impoverished country. Whoever will exercise influence on Damascus does not gain that much. In fact, to the extent that the Russians need to prove that they are real friends of Assad, they would have to support Damascus financially, for many years. And this may prove to be quite a burden for a Russian state not exactly swimming in wealth.

Iran's influence in Syria is a concern. However, there are several counterweights within the region to Tehran's hegemonic ambitions. From this perspective, it would be prudent for Washington to continue supporting its traditional Sunni Arab allies who are actively opposing Tehran's expansionism.

Middle East no longer of critical importance

That said, even taking all this into account, the idea that Washington *"must"* regain its historic role as a key powerful player in the Middle East has no longer any strong rational justification.

Of course, until a few years ago, one could have argued that the Middle East indeed had extraordinary strategic value for Washington, because it sits on most of the oil the rest of the world desperately needs.

Well, this argument is far less compelling today, in this new era of abundant oil supplies in large measure caused by America's newly discovered technologies (fracking and horizontal drilling) that allowed US energy companies to exploit massive domestic shale oil reserves. Indeed, thanks to fracking, in just a few years America doubled its oil production. This is a real game changer.

Besides, if you add to this dramatic domestic oil production

boom increased oil supplies from Canada, plus imports from Mexico, Colombia, and Venezuela, the U.S. has, or will soon have, "*hemispheric energy independence*". This means that most of the oil America will need will come from domestic sources or from imports from reliable neighboring countries, and not from the Persian Gulf.

Middle Eastern oil not so important

Now, this is a major and completely benign geopolitical change! In simple language, as the U.S. no longer relies on Middle Eastern oil for its very economic viability, controlling events in the region is no longer such a key priority.

Besides, going forward, the slow but steady emergence of electric vehicles as commercially plausible alternatives to gasoline powered cars makes the strategic importance of oil, and therefore of Middle Eastern oil and whoever owns it or controls it, progressively far less significant.

Down the line, if you take oil out of the equation, or at least if you downgrade its strategic value as the (no longer so) essential fuel for all modern industrial countries, the Middle East becomes far less important. Absent oil and the power and wealth that it brings, Taiwan is a far more significant player in the global economy than Saudi Arabia.

Let Syria go

Bottom line, let's not fret about who will be in charge in Damascus. After years of civil war that caused destruction and millions of refugees, Syria is a disaster, a true basket case. Even assuming wildly optimistic scenarios, it will take years and astronomic investments to bring it back to semi normality. Let Russia worry about all this.

Palace Coup In Zimbabwe Will Not Bring Along Genuine Democracy

WASHINGTON – Despite some last minute confusion regarding the timing of his exit, Robert “Mad Bob” Mugabe is finally gone. He is a despot, a cruel dictator, and the undisputed author of Zimbabwe’s economic ruin. After 37 years of autocracy, is this finally good riddance? Well, I would not bet on a good outcome. A happy ending is highly unlikely. Indeed, this sudden change at the top of the government in Zimbabwe is certainly not about an injured nation that finally rebels against its tormentor, forcing him out of power while creating genuine foundations for democratic rule and true accountability.

Just a palace coup

Sadly, this is just a garden variety palace coup. One faction against another, with the military finally deciding that it was time for the old man (now 93) to go. In particular, the army chiefs did not like the prospect of Grace Mugabe, the President’s much younger and equally rapacious wife, replacing him this way creating a dynastic rule.

For this reason the generals took over and rearranged the palace furniture, so that their favorite “leader”, Emmerson Mnangagwa, Mugabe’s Vice President, (who had just been sacked by Mugabe), will become the next president. Now 75, Mnangagwa, is not exactly part of the next generation. At home, he is affectionately known as the “Crocodile”. This nickname alone may give you an idea of what kind of man will become the

future president of a post-Mugabe Zimbabwe.

New handpicked leader not a champion of democracy

The poor citizens of this unlucky country are rejoicing –for the moment. They chant in the streets of Harare, proclaiming that now they are finally “free”. Well, I would not be so sure.

Their new leader is also a cruel despot, while perhaps endowed with a bit more pragmatic attitude, at least if compared to Mugabe. It is a well known fact that as a senior cabinet official, for years Mnangagwa (cheerfully?) implemented the most awful violations of human rights directed by his boss, “Mad Bob” Mugabe.

Economic disaster

So, here is the grim picture. After 37 long years of Mugabe’s systematic looting and monstrous mismanagement, the economy of Zimbabwe is virtually destroyed. It will take a miracle to create a genuine pro-growth, business friendly environment that will entice desperately needed foreign investors.

The “regime change” that just took place, while welcome, won’t mean much when it comes to hopes of economic development; unless it is accompanied by genuine democratic reforms. And this is highly unlikely. Indeed, we can rest assured that the authors of this palace coup acted in their own self-interest; most certainly not in the interest of the people.

Silence across Africa

But this is not the entire story about poor Zimbabwe. The real story is that for decades all the African leaders stood silent, as Mugabe imposed his cruel dictatorship on the citizens of Zimbabwe who back in 1980 applauded him as their liberator.

Indeed, it is absolutely true that Robert Mugabe led the fight

against white minority rule. And he deserves credit for that. Because of his role in the struggle against oppression, after this troubled former British colony finally obtained independence from the UK, (this way formally ending the white minority regime), Mugabe became the legitimate leader of Zimbabwe back in 1980.

This happened after Ian Smith, the self-appointed leader of a new Rhodesia led by a white minority government, was forced to give up power, and abandon his crazy dream of a sustainable white minority government. Because of his critical role in the long struggle against the white minority government, Mugabe the Freedom Fighter entered the Olympus of Africa's Great Men.

That said, it became obvious almost from day one that the poor people of Zimbabwe had traded one white dictator (Ian Smith) for another (Robert Mugabe). The difference being that Mugabe was a resistance hero and therefore politically untouchable, within Zimbabwe and across Africa.

South Africa did nothing

And yet much could have been done to stop him. Especially after the end of white minority rule in South Africa in 1994, it would have been quite possible for the new African National Congress (ANC) leadership now in power in Pretoria to force Mugabe to stop or at least tone down his crazy autocratic rule. By African standards, South Africa's economy is a giant compared to that of neighboring Zimbabwe. Had it wanted to, South Africa could have easily imposed its will on Harare.

But no, absolutely nothing was done. South Africa did nothing. Zimbabwe's other neighbors also did nothing. The African Union did nothing. Ostensibly this silence about Mugabe's gross violations of human rights was out of deferential respect for a "Freedom Fighter" who got rid of white oppression, this way gaining a special place in the hearts of all Africans.

Yes, Mugabe did good things in his years as a Freedom Fighter.

But he will be remembered as one of the worst (and most incompetent when it comes to economic management) dictators of this century. And every African head of state knew all this. And they did absolutely nothing to stop him.

Disingenuous western media

Let me add a sad foot note to this tragic story. A recent BBC retrospective analysis of Mugabe's 37 rule is titled: "*Robert Mugabe -revolutionary hero or the man who wrecked Zimbabwe?*". This headline is at best disingenuous, at worst horrible journalism.

After 37 years of dictatorship which led to economic ruin, fantastic inflation, political persecutions against ethnic opponents and millions of Zimbabweans in exile, is the BBC still in doubt about who Mugabe really is? Does this matter really require further scrutiny and analysis before reaching a conclusion?

Come on, BBC!

Manafort Indictment Is Just The Beginning

WASHINGTON – Russia probe Special Counsel Robert Mueller indicted former Trump insider Paul Manafort and his associate

Richard Gates in connection with his broad mandate to investigate alleged efforts on the part of Russian operatives to manipulate the 2016 elections. Mueller's investigation is also supposed to provide conclusive evidence as to whether or not there was any "collusion" between Russian operatives and individuals working for the Trump campaign.

No Russia connection

Well, if you were expecting explosive developments coming out of these indictments, you will be disappointed. Manafort and Gates are accused of several serious financial and other crimes. But there is nothing in the indictment that alleges actions or conspiracies related to possible connections between Russia and the Trump campaign. Zero. Absolutely nothing.

Assuming that the charges can be proven in court, Manafort and Gates are two sleazy and clearly a bit too self-confident "Beltway Bandits" who sold their services to people close to then Ukrainian President Victor Yanucovych. Bear in mind that such an activity is not illegal.

Tax fraud and money laundering

What is illegal is to conceal the profits of such consulting activities, while also concealing the nature and full scope of the work done on behalf of a major foreign client.

In other words, even assuming that Manafort and Gates are guilty, (for the record, both of them pleaded "not guilty" when they appeared in front of a judge on Monday), they would be guilty mostly of tax evasion and money laundering –serious offenses, no doubt; but completely disconnected from the main thrust of Mueller's investigation about alleged collusion between the Trump Campaign and Russian operatives.

What is Mueller up to?

So, what do we make of this? First of all we should understand that this is by no means the end of Mueller's investigation. At most, this is the end of the first act. We are still at the beginning of a long process.

If this is indeed so, then the money laundering and tax evasion charges against Manafort and Gates, apparently disconnected from the main thrust of the Russia inquiry, acquire a new flavor. If Special Counsel Mueller has reason to believe that Manafort knows something important about an alleged Trump-Russia collusion, then the indictment against him is in fact a form of heavy psychological pressure.

Pit pressure on the small fish

It is quite common for American prosecutors to go with full force against second or third tier players in a criminal investigation in order to force them to collaborate with them in exchange for leniency. Keep in mind that, if proven guilty, Manafort could go the jail for many years. If he fully cooperates with the authorities, his personal future becomes a lot brighter.

Is this Mueller's game plan? Yes, it probably is.

A major investigative effort cannot end with Manafort

Indeed, it is most unlikely that Robert Mueller, a tough, seasoned law enforcement official, an experienced lawyer and a former FBI Director, assembled a large team of important lawyers and prosecutors just to investigate Paul Manafort –a questionable character whose crime seems to be that he tried to hide a few millions of dollars (of legitimate earnings) from the IRS. Therefore, it cannot be that this is the end of the probe. It would be wise to stipulate that with this indictment Mueller is just getting started.

Will they find anything?

That said, this does not guarantee that Mueller, despite a serious effort to determine whether crimes were committed, will find anything. Investigating potential wrongdoing and actually finding any are two different things.

Will Washington Give Arms To Ukraine?

WASHINGTON – Back in February 2014, right after a popular rebellion ousted pro-Russian President Viktor Yanucovych, this way taking over political control in Kiev, the then Obama administration was long on promises of aid and support; but very short on delivering almost anything of real value to the new supposedly pro-American and pro-European Ukrainian government.

Economic basket case

On the economic front, Ukraine was then (and still is today, by the way) a virtual basket case: an impoverished, non competitive, underperforming economy, poisoned by systemic corruption. On the military side, whatever your political preference on who is to blame for the ongoing fighting between government forces and pro-Moscow ethnic Russians in Eastern Ukraine, back in 2015 it became obvious that Washington was not going to support the new anti-Russian Kiev government in any meaningful way.

Non lethal military aid

President Obama offered some non lethal equipment, (such as radar, night vision goggles), MREs, (military food rations), blankets, uniforms, and socks, (yes, socks), to the Ukrainian

army –but no real weapons.

New Trump approach?

Now, with Trump in the White House, most recently the noises have been changing. It is no accident that U.S. Secretary of Defense Mattis recently made a high-profile visit to Kiev on that country's Independence Day. During public celebrations which included a military parade, Mattis stood at the side of Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko. Mattis trip to Kiev followed another important visit to Ukraine by Secretary of State Rex Tillerson in July.

In public remarks in Kiev Mattis stated that the Pentagon is reviewing options that could include supplying real weapons to Ukraine; including anti-tank Javelin missiles, and possibly anti-aircraft missiles.

Of course, Mattis insisted that this American hardware –assuming a US Government decision to send it to Kiev– falls under the category of defensive weapons. America's stated goal –again, assuming a green light on this– would be to give Ukraine the tools to defend itself from Russian attempts to unilaterally change borders in the East.

Mattis justified any possible U.S. policy shift regarding weapons sales to Ukraine by pointing out that Russia is not living up to its commitments under the Minsk agreements aimed at solving through peaceful means all issues related to the future of ethnic Russians in Eastern Ukraine.

Policy shift

Well, should these supplies of U.S. weapons to Ukraine actually take place, this would indicate a major policy shift from the “do nothing” Obama years. For several years, Obama's deeds (forget his speeches in support of Ukraine) indicated that America would not get involved, even indirectly, in any conflict involving Russia in Eastern Ukraine, a region with

deep historic, ethnic and religious ties to the Russian state. With Obama in the White House, Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko realized that he was on his own.

Now Donald Trump is President. So, a new more muscular approach to Ukraine in Washington vis-a-vis Russia? We shall see. Despite what Secretary Mattis just said in Kiev, I am inclined to believe that the Trump administration does not want America enmeshed, even if indirectly, in yet another, almost impossible and probably endless conflict, far from home.

A crowded national security agenda

Let's look at the long "to do" list for the U.S. military, when it comes to hot spots. Washington is and will be engaged in the Middle East, (Iraq and to a lesser extent Syria) for quite some time. The President just announced a more muscular and open-ended policy towards Afghanistan, with the stated goals of defeating the Taliban insurrection. And then you have creeping and potentially explosive crises with North Korea, Iran, and may be with China on the South China Sea. Based on recent Washington moves and public pronouncements, we may also have to add Venezuela to this already long and challenging national security agenda.

Does Washington want to add an insoluble conflict in Eastern Ukraine to the headaches list, while cash strapped America has a hard time keeping up with existing and potential commitments? I do not think so.

America Needs Ballistic Missiles Defenses

WASHINGTON – The news of North Korea's successful test of an Intercontinental Ballistic Missile, (ICBM), a missile that could theoretically hit the United States mainland is bad enough. But it gets much worse when combined with a just released assessment compiled by U.S. intelligence stating that North Korea may have also mastered the ability to miniaturize a nuclear warhead so that it can be fitted on the tip of its new ICBMs. Taken together, all this means that North Korea could soon have the capability to launch a nuclear armed intercontinental missile that could reach Seattle, Minneapolis, even Chicago or New York City. A very unpleasant prospect, given the paranoid leanings of North Korea's leader Kim Jong-un.

No defenses

But it gets worse. These unexpected developments from North Korea reminded all Washington policy-makers that America does not have real defenses against missile attacks. Yes, you got it right. America lacks meaningful defensive systems capable of neutralizing even a small scale missile attack originating from a third rate rogue state like North Korea. In simple language: we cannot be assured that we can shoot down and incoming missile before it hits America.

Yes, believe it or not, America has essentially no missile defenses. To be precise, America has some systems. But they are rudimentary and probably not accurate.

Regarding a possible nuclear attack from the Soviet Union, (later on Russia) or China, Washington relied and relies on its massive nuclear deterrent, that is on the power of dissuasion embedded in a guaranteed retaliatory strike against

an attacker. Which is to say that deterrence –a credible threat of massive retaliation against an attacker– is in essence our only protection.

Deterrence

The conventional wisdom has been and still is that no “rational” foreign leadership would consider attacking the United States with nuclear weapons, knowing that the U.S., even if mostly destroyed, would still retain a lethal retaliatory force consisting of many nuclear missiles carried by its fleet of submarines. No “rational actor” would attack America knowing in advance that America, even if mortally wounded, would retain the capability to inflict intolerable damage on the attacker.

That said, deterrence applies only to “rational actors”. However, when North Korea and soon enough Iran will have nuclear weapons and ICBMs to deliver them on target, we enter a completely new dimension. A dimension we are currently not prepared for. These are not “rational actors”. Therefore deterrence may not apply to them.

The Strategic Defense Initiative

So, what do we do? Well, a few years ago the U.S. Government articulated a revolutionary “Grand Plan” aimed at neutralizing not just some, but all nuclear weapons. Way back in the 1980s, then President Ronald Reagan was sold on the idea that we could render all nuclear weapons “impotent and obsolete” by developing a variety of anti-missile systems which could hit incoming ICBMs before their warheads could reach their targets on U.S. territory.

Reagan’s Strategic Defense Initiative, (SDI) –the Pentagon program created with the objective of developing the necessary anti-ballistic missiles technologies and weapons systems– was launched with much fanfare and a great deal of hype.

President Reagan promised that U.S. technological prowess soon enough would allow America to deploy layers of fully functioning systems able to protect America from any nuclear attack by hitting missiles and warheads before they could reach their targets on U.S. soil. These systems would render all nuclear weapons "impotent and obsolete". No point in developing nuclear weapons if they could be destroyed before they could be detonated.

It did not work

But SDI did not work out as advertised. The technological challenges were and still are immense. The task of hitting literally thousands of small targets traveling at fantastic speed, with absolute accuracy, seemed too daunting. After Reagan left the political scene in January 1989, Washington's focus shifted elsewhere.

Nonetheless America kept investing, albeit only modestly, in new anti-ballistic missiles technologies that could deliver effective systems down the line. Following this trend, at the beginning of his new administration, (January 2001), President George W. Bush made ballistic defense one of his national security priorities.

Renewed efforts in the new millennium

With the objective of pursuing more modern systems, the Bush administration in 2002 decided to withdraw from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty that the U.S. had signed with the Soviet Union in 1972, (and still enforced by the Russian Federation). By withdrawing from the ABM Treaty, an agreement which limited the numbers and types of anti-ballistic missiles that both the USSR and the US could deploy, Washington gained the latitude to test and eventually deploy new systems in line with the goals set forth by the National Missile Defense Act.

Unfortunately, 9/11 and its aftermath dramatically changed American national security priorities. Because of the two long

and costly wars, first in Afghanistan and then Iraq, the Bush administration did not devote meaningful resources to its anti-ballistic missiles programs.

Insufficient resources

The Obama administration which followed 8 years of Bush in January 2009 certainly did not recognize the urgency of this defensive program. It funded some work on anti-ballistic missile systems, but only very modestly in the ensuing 8 years.

As a result today, as we face an increasingly real North Korean nuclear threat, we have almost nothing in place to defend America against incoming nuclear armed missiles. As indicated above, we have some systems. But they are small in terms of the number of deployed interceptors, and not necessarily accurate. Therefore they are unreliable.

No military or diplomatic solution

As many have already concluded, there are no good options when it comes to eliminating the North Korean nuclear threat through military means. Attacking North Korea's missile sites and other facilities connected with its nuclear programs, while possible, most likely would trigger a general conflagration in the Korean peninsula, with the almost inevitable direct involvement of South Korea, China, and possibly Japan.

Non military solutions do not exist. Diplomacy will not convince Kim Jong-un to scrap its nuclear program, simply because this is the only asset he has that gives him international standing. Without nuclear weapons North Korea is just a grotesque aberration: an impoverished police state run by a crazy despot.

The recent new round of UN sanctions imposed against North Korea, should not create false hopes. The Security Council

unanimous vote has been applauded because it may lead us to believe that China is finally coming to our side. But it is not so.

China will not help

As long as China keeps the North Korean economy and state above water –and there is no sign that Beijing will cut all economic ties with its old ally– North Korea will continue to have the financial and technical means to continue its nuclear weapons programs. Therefore, do not count on more UN sanctions as the tool that will make this emerging nuclear threat against America and its allies go away.

Redouble our efforts

All in all, even recognizing that Washington wasted at least 10 years doing almost nothing when it comes to creating defensive systems against nuclear armed ballistic missiles, now is the time to redouble our efforts and invest in state of the art interceptors and other devices that some day will neutralize the threat posed by rogue nuclear states.

US Enacted Sanctions Against Russia

WASHINGTON – It should not come as a surprise that Russian President Vladimir Putin decided to retaliate in kind, after the US Congress passed a bill (subsequently signed into law by President Trump) that includes tough economic sanctions against Russia, as retribution for Russia's alleged

interference in the US 2016 elections, and for unrelated issues pertaining to its meddling in Ukraine and more.

Punish Russia

Back in 2016, then US President Barack Obama ordered punitive measures against Russian diplomats stationed in the USA based on US intelligence findings that Russia had actively attempted to interfere in the U.S. elections via hacking and other cyber attacks. The sanctions included the expulsion of a number of Russian diplomats. These sanctions were included in a presidential directive issued by Obama. As such they could have been rescinded by the new president. But now the tougher sanctions have been enacted by the Congress and therefore President Trump will not be able to eliminate them or modify them unilaterally.

Putin's reaction

After the US Congress passed this law containing sanctions, by a huge margin in both houses, Putin decided to get even, as he realized that these are "veto proof" majorities. In other words, even if he wanted to, a more conciliatory President Trump could not have blocked this legislation.

Putin's objective seems to get even. In order to bring the number of US diplomatic personnel in Russia down to the same level of what Russia is allowed to have in the United States, (455), 755 American diplomats will have to leave Russia. This is a major cut.

Impact

Will this move affect Washington Moscow based diplomats' ability to engage Russia in a meaningful way? Probably yes, even though it is not clear at this time which sectors of the bilateral relationship will be mostly affected by these significant cuts.

Most of all, this sequence of tough actions and counter actions indicates that US – Russia relations are in very bad shape, without any signs of improvements.

No Ambassador

To make things worse, keep in mind that the U.S. currently has no Ambassador in Moscow. Former Utah Governor and now Chairman of the Atlantic Council Jon Huntsman has been nominated by President Trump to fill that post, but he has not yet been confirmed by the Senate.

Once confirmed, will Huntsman, an astute businessman who also served as U.S. Ambassador to China, be able to help turn things around? There are at least some areas in which Washington and Moscow can find common ground. At some point, there will have to be some kind of agreement on the future of Syria. There is also an opportunity to convince Russia that it is not to its ultimate advantage to be on the same side of Iran in the Middle East.

Common front on North Korea?

And finally there is the looming threat of North Korea's long-range ballistic missiles, soon to be armed with nuclear warheads. North Korea's threat is clearly aimed at the USA and its allies, South Korea and Japan. But Russia cannot be too happy with the idea of an unstable regime capable of launching nuclear armed Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles, (ICBMs) at its door step.

The Russia probe cloud

That said, for the bilateral relations climate to improve, the whole "Russia probe" now led by former FBI Director Robert Mueller must be concluded in Washington. Indeed, whatever the outcome of Mueller's investigations, only after he is done it will be possible to go back to a "normal" dialogue between Moscow and Washington.

That said, in the end, both sides must know that there is nothing to be gained when the two most important nuclear powers on earth do not engage with each other. Nuclear war between Russia and America is a very, very remote possibility. But such a possibility may be increased by misunderstandings and misperceptions.

Notwithstanding the sharp differences between the two countries, open lines of communication are an essential tool that will help prevent fatal errors. And both sides should know that they need competent diplomats in each other's capitals to keep those lines open.

America Cut Funds to Syrian Rebels

WASHINGTON – After the fall of Aleppo, I concluded that the Syrian opposition to Assad had been essentially defeated. Sure, some resistance still exists. But the chances of overthrowing Assad via military actions is a dream. Americans (half-hearted, in my view) efforts to force regime change in Damascus by supporting the domestic Syrian opposition through military assistance have failed.

No more US aid to the opposition

Now we learn that the Trump administration about a month ago decided to stop helping the Syrian rebels via a CIA operation code-named "Timber Sycamore". I call this cutting one's losses and moving on.

Of course, some analysts immediately argued that cutting off

the rebels is a big Trump favor to Russian President Putin. A big favor without getting anything in return. They argue that arming the Syrian rebels was smart policy, because it created a pressure point against the Assad regime that could have been used at a later date as a bargaining chip during negotiations about a future settlement of the conflict in Syria.

It did not work

May be so. But, while the details about how much money was spent and how cost-effective this operation has been are not publicly available, the truth is that the Syrian opposition aided by the US and several Arab countries was never very effective; and now it has been essentially beaten. Not completely destroyed. Still, after the fall of Aleppo, it lost any chance of overthrowing the Damascus regime, or even inflicting serious damages to it.

Accept defeat

The Trump administration seems to have accepted this; while it is keen on focusing on the ongoing fight against the Islamic State, or ISIL. Therefore: *“Let’s cut or losses, concentrate our efforts on beating ISIL, and stop throwing good money after bad”*.

New consensus

There seems to be a new consensus within the US Government that removing Assad from power is no longer a priority. (Obama instead repeatedly declared that Assad “had to go”, because of his violations of human rights and other crimes against the Syrian people). Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and others actually said publicly that the removal of President Assad is no longer a precondition for any serious talks about the future of Syria.

Waste of money

Given all this, continuing a CIA funded operation aimed at arming a few Syrian rebels who do not have any realistic chances to achieve much against regular pro-Assad forces backed by Russia, Iran and Hezbollah, seems like a waste of time and money.

Betrayed

Of course, if you were part of a Syrian rebels group that had been included in this CIA funded program and you were counting on continuing American military and financial support, you have every right of feeling betrayed. But this would not be the first time in which allies of America have been dropped by Washington, on account of larger strategic considerations.

Why Is Montenegro Joining NATO A Big Deal?

WASHINGTON – With the US Senate approving by a huge margin Montenegro entering NATO, the US-led security pact, (only 2 senators opposed), soon enough this small country, once a region of the former Yugoslavia, will join the western military alliance created on April 4, 1949 with the Treaty of Washington. In “normal” times, this tiny NATO enlargement should not be an event that would move the needle one way or the other.

Montenegro is small

Indeed, on the face of it, Montenegro NATO membership should be a “non issue”. Hard to believe how a very small Balkan

nation, with a population of 650,000, an army with only 2,000 soldiers, and a country GDP that is about the same size as the budget of the New York City police force, will alter the balance of forces in Europe.

A symbol

And yet, it is a sign of the times we live in that this issue of Montenegro and its accession into NATO somehow has become a big deal. Russia sees this step of Montenegro joining NATO as further evidence of a relentless eastward NATO expansion, most likely with the intent of encircling the Russian Federation, therefore creating a national security threat for Moscow.

Sending a message to Moscow

The US and other western countries instead want to portray the extension of NATO's protection to this small Balkan nation as a manifestation of western political resolve. Russia is accused of trying to alter unilaterally the post war borders of Europe. Washington extending a helping hand to Montenegro, this way guaranteeing its security from possible external threats, supposedly would send a signal to Estonia, Poland and other NATO members bordering Russia: *"America is here to stay in Europe. No intention to leave. Abiding by the letter of the NATO Treaty, Washington pledges that it will stand by its allies, large and small, no matter what"*.

Adding more complexity to the Montenegro accession issue, it is clear that the country was and is divided on this matter. Pro NATO political forces have accused Russia of meddling.

Moscow and Washington should address distrust issues

Be that as it may, instead of using tiny Montenegro as a political symbol, it would be better for both Washington and Moscow to get together and seriously try to find common ground regarding legitimate security concerns. No, NATO is not about to attack Russia. By the same token, NATO should recognize

Russian concerns regarding ethnic Russians outside of the borders of the Russian Federation, and Moscow's historic connections with Slavic nations in Eastern Europe and the Balkans. The way forward should include ways which will enable Russia to feel more secure, while NATO countries can be convinced that Russia will use diplomacy, and not military force, (or subversion), to further its political interests in Eastern Europe and other border areas.

Find a way to improve East-West relations

Montenegro's accession to NATO will change nothing when it comes to the balance of forces in Europe. However, the very fact that we are even talking about this enlargement of the western alliance as a real problem, contributing to the further deterioration of East-West political relations, is indicative of the under currents of deep distrust between the US and Russia.

It should be in the interest of both Washington and Moscow to address this distrust.