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Progressive Foreign Policy Debrief

Intel for Advocacy

TOPLINE TAKEAWAYS

- *Alarm bells are going off: The U.S. is on a path to war with North Korea.*
- *Things are not going well in Afghanistan, and the Pentagon's solution is to hide the facts.*
- *Trump's Syria policies don't make any sense.*

TRUMP SIGNALS PATH TO WAR WITH NORTH KOREA

Donald Trump's State of Union address this week could prove to be historic in that it subtly made the case for war with North Korea.

[Just as George W. Bush had done](#) in his 2002 State of the Union address making the case for war with Iraq, Trump painted an -- albeit justifiably -- grim picture of North Korea, focusing on the regime's gross human rights violations and **seemed to draw a red line for U.S.-led military action** if -- or more likely when -- North Korea acquires nuclear tipped missiles, saying he would not allow Kim Jong-un to "threaten our homeland."

Trump's national security adviser H.R. McMaster appeared to offer a preview of this policy [back in September](#), saying that certain threats from North Korea might provoke a U.S. military response, falsely adding that a regime like North Korea's cannot be deterred.

On a separate track, it also appears that Trump is still seriously considering a so-called "bloody nose" strike, as some kind of [credibility move](#) to show the U.S. is serious. [Experts](#) across the ideological spectrum have called this idea "[insane](#)" and have repeatedly warned that even a limited military strike could quickly escalate into a major war, killing hundreds of thousands, if not millions.

Meanwhile, **in a move that appears to confirm Trump's trajectory toward war**, his nominee to be U.S. Ambassador to South Korea, Victor Cha, was [reportedly](#) forced to withdraw because he questioned the wisdom of an attack. In a subsequent [op-ed](#), Cha said the answer to stopping North Korea's nuclear weapons program "is not ... a preventive military strike."

Put all of this together and you have a clear picture of **Donald Trump pushing our country towards war with North Korea.**

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Here are some key points to remember as this issue heats up:

- War with North Korea -- in Defense Secretary James Mattis's words -- would be ["catastrophic."](#)
 - North Korea [could cause](#) **tens of thousands** of casualties in South Korea using conventional weapons **during the first hours** of an armed conflict.
 - The Pentagon [concluded](#) recently that in the event of a conflict, North Korea would likely use **chemical and biological weapons**.
 - The Joint Chiefs of Staff stated in an August 2017 [letter](#) that a military option would require "a ground invasion," which could **result in the death of thousands or even millions in the first few days of fighting**.
- Diplomacy is the only way to rein in and end North Korea's nuclear weapons program.
- Experts called Trump's plan for a "[limited](#)" or "bloody nose" strike on North Korea "[insane](#)," and said it would likely lead to full scale war [that could turn nuclear](#).

IN OTHER NORTH KOREA NEWS:

Former Director of National Intelligence Dennis Blair **poured cold water on the idea that North Korea can't be deterred** during a Congressional hearing this week. Kim Jong-un, he [said](#), "is as subject to deterrence from the actual use of those weapons as have been all governments, totalitarian or democratic, that have developed a nuclear capability since the atomic age began."

Former Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel [spoke out](#) this week against a "bloody nose" attack. "I **wouldn't want to take that gamble**," he said, adding, "Let's be smarter."

[TRUMP IS ALL OVER THE MAP ON SYRIA](#)

The Trump administration announced this week it [would extend](#) Temporary Protected Status (TPS) to roughly 7,000 Syrian refugees for another 18 months. Yet despite the ongoing civil war there -- one in which the U.S. is an active participant -- and insecurity throughout the country, the administration said those Syrians who arrived in the United States after August 1, 2016 will not be protected.

[Rights groups](#) like the International Rescue Committee criticized the decision, calling the move to block TPS to Syrians arriving after August 2016 confusing and [irrational](#), "especially when the State Department unequivocally recognizes that 'no part of Syria is safe from violence.'"

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At the same time, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson [announced](#) last month that the United States [military](#) will stay in Syria indefinitely to combat ISIS, curtail Iranian influence, and prevent Syrian President Bashar al-Assad from retaking swaths of territory.

So to sum up, the Trump administration's Syria policy is effectively:

1. We don't really like Syrian refugees (see the Muslim Ban) but Syria is too dangerous to deny vulnerable Syrians inside the U.S. TPS, and yet...
2. Despite the fact that Syria is so dangerous, some vulnerable Syrian populations have to go back, but...
3. We're going to continue with an indefinite military presence in Syria, a policy that all but assures that Syria remains a dangerous place.

This policy makes no sense.

Vox's Dara Lind [summed up some of the confusion](#) on the TPS status:

The heart of the matter is that the Trump administration, philosophically, **does not believe that there is such a thing as a "global refugee crisis."** It doesn't believe that the fact that millions of people are displaced, and that displacement is becoming a long-term or permanent condition for many of them, creates any kind of intrinsic obligation to other countries.

KEY POINTS TO REMEMBER:

- **Trump's Syria policies are built on reckless militarism, Islamophobia and contempt for vulnerable communities** — not compassion, strategy, American values, or [the rule of law](#).
- **There is no military solution to the conflict in Syria.** A permanent resolution to these crises will require rigorous diplomatic engagement and humanitarian leadership from powers that fuel and steer the violence. A path that the U.S has yet to embark upon.
- The administration's decision to not re-designate TPS for Syria, dismantling of the U.S. refugee and foreign assistance programs, and abandonment of diplomacy continue to come at the cost of **tearing livelihoods and families apart, and perpetuating one of the worst crises of human security and suffering on the globe.**

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- **The U.S. is failing the test** of strategy coherence, courage, and responsibility to protect the laws and values enshrined in the U.S. constitution, and Donald Trump is heedlessly ordering the charge.

AMERICA'S LONGEST WAR ISN'T GOING WELL YET THE PENTAGON'S SOLUTION IS TO HIDE THAT SIMPLE FACT

Last week, the Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction (SIGAR) [reported](#) that **the U.S. military has been turning a blind eye to human rights abuses within the Afghan military**, including the practice of so-called “bacha bazi,” where Afghan commanders keep underage boys as sex slaves.

American law requires that military aid be cut off if such abuses are found to be occurring, and while the practice is reportedly “rampant” among Afghan commanders, not once has military aid been withdrawn.

While the report was a small victory for transparency in the 17 year long war effort in Afghanistan – despite its heavy redactions and incomplete conclusions – SIGAR also [revealed this week](#) that **the Defense Department has ordered it to stop providing data to the public about progress, or lack thereof, in Afghanistan.**

Going forward, SIGAR will no longer be allowed to report how much territory the Afghan government has control of, versus the Taliban and contested areas (currently it's around 60 percent to 10 percent to 30 percent, respectively, while one [recent report](#) found that the Taliban are threatening 70 percent of the country).

“The restrictions fly in the face of Pentagon assertions over the past year that it was striving to be more transparent about the U.S. war campaigns across Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan,” the AP [noted](#). Thanks to public outcry, including a scathing [op-ed](#) by Sen. Chuck Grassley, the Pentagon immediately walked back the restriction.

Meanwhile, the New York Times [noted](#) this week that hopes for some kind of military “victory” in Afghanistan are all but gone, even as thousands more American combat troops pour in as part of President Trump’s pledge to ramp up the fight.

If past is prologue, Trump’s gambit won’t succeed. The UN already [stated](#) last year that there is no military solution to the conflict, while the former Special Representative for Afghanistan under Obama made clear no “serious analyst” [believes](#) the war is winnable.

Despite these facts, Trump [stated](#) that negotiating with the Taliban is a non-starter. Showing sunlight between the president who makes policy as he thinks of it and seasoned diplomats,

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U.S. officials quickly [corrected](#) the president, expressing “surprise at Trump’s comments” as “there was an understanding that defeating the Taliban was not purely a military problem.”

The one thing that is clear is that Donald Trump has no plan for peace in Afghanistan. His actions will only sure that **America’s longest war drags on for years to come.**

BURIED LEDES

An Israeli investigative reporter [says](#) **Trump shared more intel with the Russians than has been publicly revealed.**

Congress voted last year almost unanimously to sanction Russia for its meddling in the 2016 election, **but the Trump administration won’t implement those sanctions.** And its explanation is a bit ... [strange](#).

This doesn’t get talked about enough but [it’s true](#): “There, undeniably, would be no ISIS if we hadn’t invaded Iraq.”

Donald Trump is [playing](#) **a dangerous game of nuclear poker.** (Don’t forget, the “Doomsday Clock” was recently moved closer to midnight [largely because of Trump](#).)

And finally, it [seems](#) that **Google’s “Don’t Be Evil” mantra has its limitations** (cough: Saudi Arabia).