

**Statement before the U.S. House of Representatives
Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence**

***“THE RISK OF NATION-STATE
CONFLICT: CHINA, RUSSIA, NORTH
KOREA, AND IRAN”***

A Statement by

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Chairman Rogers, Ranking Member Ruppersberger, and distinguished members of the committee, I appreciate the opportunity to testify before you today. The United States faces the most daunting mix of security challenges in its history. The proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and advanced technology, combined with the rise of militant, anti-Western groups with potential access to these means, have contributed substantially to the broadening of threats to our vital interests. In the period following September 11, 2001, out of necessity, our focus has been on the non-state threats that could result in terrorist attacks on the United States, its allies, or our citizens abroad.

The March 2014 events in Ukraine, however, were a stark reminder that state-based opportunism is alive and well. If the United States ignores the challenges posed by major powers such as Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran, it does so at its own peril. The likelihood of conflict between the United States and one of these major powers is not great, but the probability is not zero, and the risks of any such conflict are profound. Miscalculation would almost certainly play a central role in the development of direct conflict between the United States and another nation-state. I will briefly address the capabilities of each of these powers, how conflict might arise between them and the United States, and what we are or can do to mitigate the likelihood of a military clash and its consequences.

Russia

Russia's lightning-fast occupation and annexation of Crimea is an object lesson in the enduring interests of major states in their peripheries. Russia's bold, duplicitous, and unapologetic annexation of Crimea surprised many. Russia is indisputably a declining power, with demographic and economic challenges that are worsening by the year. In the face of these trends, President Vladimir Putin's rashness and opportunism are helping him ride a wave of domestic political support fueled by Russian ethnic nationalism.

There are two important doctrinal trends occurring in Russian military thought. First, it has shifted its doctrine over the past five years to the high-risk proposition of relying on its significant strategic capabilities—nuclear, cyber, and space—at the outset of conflicts. Its goal is to deter US and NATO intervention by adopting an early escalation strategy. In short, Russia may seek to de-escalate conflicts quickly by escalating them to the strategic realm at the outset. Second, Russia has been steadily improving its means for unconventional warfare, as we saw in Crimea. This includes extensive information operations capabilities, development and use of proxy forces, and funding for sympathetic local movements. The seeming goal, successful in the case of Crimea, is to achieve Russian security objectives without need for a costly and domestically divisive traditional military campaign.

A direct military confrontation between the United States and Russia on the territory of either remains a remote possibility. Much more concerning is the possibility of conflict over Russian actions around its periphery. Here we must separate out two very different

sets of scenarios. One involves Russian aggression, even veiled, against the Baltic States or other NATO members. Here the United States has been very clear about its commitment to the mutual defense provision of the NATO Treaty, and since this summer, we have backed that commitment up with a steady flow of military deployments into Poland, the Baltic States, and other NATO countries. US presence in these countries significantly increases the risks to Russia of initiating conflict there.

There is, however, a second set of countries inside the area that Russia defines as its “near abroad.” These nations are not members of NATO, nor are they likely to be anytime soon. The United States and NATO have not been clear in their signaling of intent or capability to protect these countries from Russian aggression. Putin may gamble, as he did in Ukraine, that the United States and its European allies are not willing to come to the aid of such countries, particularly if the threat posed by Russia is an unconventional one. The risks of miscalculation in these cases could thus be high. Based on its Georgia and Crimea experiences, Russia might anticipate a weak US or NATO response to Russian aggression outside NATO’s borders, but the pendulum of public opinion in the United States, Poland, and elsewhere might swing toward a stronger response in future cases that surprises Russia and leads to deeper conflict.

China

As with Russia, the greatest risk of conflict between China and the United States would likely stem from a dispute involving a third party. China has been schooling the United States about its territorial interests in East Asia for some time and has slowly eroded international norms regarding freedom of the air and seas along its periphery. It has also embarked on an extensive military improvement plan, focused largely on air and maritime capabilities. The United States, in turn, has been asserting its role in Asia for decades, most recently expressed in the Obama Administration’s rebalance to Asia. There are four important military components to the U.S. rebalance strategy that China is surely watching: advancing counter anti-access/area denial capabilities, developing operational concepts to best bring those capabilities to bear, expanding military-to-military engagements in the region, and improving the posture of U.S. forces in Asia.

China and the United States have a shared interest in avoiding direct conflict, given the immense costs each can impose on the other in both military and economic terms. Although this shared interest has motivated areas of cooperation between the two states, the underlying security dynamics among China, the United States, Japan, and other East Asian nations give cause for concern. Nationalism in China and Japan, a long history of territorial disputes among China and several of its neighbors, the rapid progression of Chinese expeditionary capability, and the relatively limited amount of bilateral military-to-military cooperation that the United States and China enjoy all create conditions in which miscalculation over interests, intentions, and will could arise. The United States needs to continue seeking areas to expand cooperation with China, such as humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, while developing the military concepts, and associated

capabilities that can credibly deter aggression from China over the long term. And, it needs to do so without imposing financial burdens on us. The United States also needs to be firm in its commitment to exercising freedom of navigation in international air and waterways so China can have no doubt about our principled defense of these norms.

North Korea

North Korea is the most likely state to engage in a direct military conflict with the United States. It might do so because it lashes out during a regime collapse, but it is more probable that North Korea will simply miscalculate the U.S. or South Korean response to one of its provocations and then is unable to control crisis dynamics. There is also the chance of the North Korean regime collapsing, which could result in U.S. military operations inside North Korea as part of an alliance or coalition response.

The United States has roughly 30,000 service personnel in South Korea and a treaty commitment to our South Korean allies. Although North Korea's large conventional military is probably no match for South Korean combined armed forces, and certainly no match for the U.S. military, the North Korean threat today is worrisome not because of its sizable manpower but because of its increasing missile capability, emergent nuclear technology, special operations forces, and likely reliance on chemical and biological weapons. I am concerned that Americans have become so accustomed to North Korea's provocations and inured to the diabolical nature of its regime that we forget the ever-present threat that Kim Jung Un's regime poses. We must maintain a steady focus on encouraging needed, stabilizing improvements in South Korean military capability, routinely engage the Chinese and South Koreans on issues affecting the peninsula, and be ready to respond to North Korean provocations in a way that prudently manages escalation risks and conveys our deep commitment to South Korea's security.

Iran

There are several foreseeable instances in which the United States could find itself in combat operations against Iran. First, the inability to date of the United States and Iran to reach an agreement that would assure the United States, Israel, and others of Iran's inability to maintain or quickly develop nuclear weapons risks U.S. and/or Israeli military action against Iran in lieu of a diplomatic conclusion. Second, Iran's sponsorship of terrorist activities and organizations throughout the Greater Middle East could create threats to U.S. territory, citizens, and other interests to which the United States will feel the need to respond. Third, Iran's support for the Assad regime in Syria and for militant Shi'a groups in Iraq could result in a clash of arms that escalates from proxy forces to involve the United States and Iran directly.

Iran has impressive conventional military capabilities, but as with the other countries I have discussed, they are currently not on par with the United States. The most concerning threat posed by Iran today is instead its unconventional capabilities and its ability to create a crisis in the Arabian Gulf due to its strategic position along the Strait of

Hormuz. Given the complexity of interests at stake in its Iran relationship, the United States is right to seek ongoing, high-level communication channels with the Iranians in order to make our interests and intentions clear and to provide a means for clearing up miscommunications where possible. Trust should be significantly tempered, however, given the record of Iranian destabilizing activities in the Middle East and past dishonesty about its nuclear program.

Conclusion

I do not today believe that China, Russia, North Korea, or Iran, or for that matter any state, seeks to precipitate a war with the United States. Nevertheless, as human history has shown, war may in fact occur. My single greatest concern regarding the four states I have just discussed is that they might spark conflict with the United States out of a miscalculation of US interests, willingness, and capability to respond to provocations short of war. While we have an excellent record of deterring existential threats to the United States, we face a deterrence challenge for so-called “grey area” threats. The United States must better shape the calculus of those states that wish to test our response to ambiguous challenges. This will mean clearly communicating those interests and our willingness and capability to act in defense of them. It also means carrying out threats when deterrence fails. Without that commitment, the value of deterrence will continue to erode, and the risk of great power conflict will rise.