

Arcanum in the news

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By Claudia Grisales

EXPERTS: US MISSTEPS HELP INCITE CONFLICT WITH NORTH KOREA, RAISING SPECTER OF WAR

WASHINGTON – A lack of a unified strategy with U.S. allies. Depleted ranks at the State Department. No U.S. ambassador to South Korea. A diminished U.S. role in Pacific trade.

These are a handful of the liabilities helping raise tensions between the United States and North Korea and incite the potential for war, an expert panel warned a Senate committee on Tuesday.

Under President Donald Trump, the United States has reduced its influence in Southeast Asia as North Korea escalates its nuclear weapons program, they testified during a Senate Armed Services Committee hearing.

“Unfortunately, there are a lot of doubts both on the North Korean side, but also amongst our allies, about what our long-term play is,” said Kelly Magsamen, vice president of national security and international policy for Center for American Progress, a Washington progressive policy research group. “There is a significant amount of questioning going on about our ability to follow through on diplomacy and the potential for war.”

The testimony is the latest sobering look at the possibility of a widespread, violent confrontation with North Korea and could influence the development of the next National Defense Authorization Act. Last week, former secretaries of state Henry Kissinger and George Shultz told the same committee that North Korea is the most imminent threat facing the United States today.

Soon, North Korea will have the capacity to attack any U.S. city with devastating effects, Sen. Jim Inhofe, R-Okla., reminded members in prepared remarks Tuesday.

“In view of this stark reality, this committee must confront difficult questions about the U.S. policy and strategy for achieving our stated objectives of defending our homeland, protecting our allies, and denuclearizing the Korean

Peninsula,” said Inhofe, the acting committee chairman in lieu of Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., who is battling brain cancer.

One year ago, Trump withdrew the United States from the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement, a setback for U.S. relations in Southeast Asia, testified Michael Green, a former White House national security aide during former President George W. Bush’s administration. Trump has also ushered in a new era of challenges for diplomacy and the State Department, he added.

“We’ve lost ground,” said Green, who is now a senior adviser for the Washington think tank Center for Strategic and International Studies. “If you don’t have a confirmed assistant secretary (of state), if you don’t have a clear strategy for your diplomats, if you don’t have a trade strategy, they have nothing to work with. And you can just feel it in the region that we’ve lost (ground) in that critical part of Asia.”

It’s not enough that Trump spent 12 days in Asia last year and Defense Secretary Jim Mattis has made more trips there in his first year than any of his predecessors, Green said. Rather, it’s up to the State Department to maintain critical relationships with the 10-country organization known as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, or ASEAN.

“Our diplomats are not empowered,” Green said. “The maintenance of our relationship with the 10 members of ASEAN – Thailand, Malaysia and so forth – that’s done by the State Department. It’s not done by the White House.”

Retired Navy Adm. Dennis Blair, who is now chairman at the Sasakawa Peace Foundation, said a series of misconceptions have dominated the North Korea picture. He argued U.S. nuclear deterrence and overall policy has been effective and North Korea might still give up its nuclear weapons.

The United States also has many policy choices other than attacking North Korea, Blair said. That includes stiffer sanctions and a boost in U.S. alliances with Japan and South Korea.

“The worst mistake we could make is to come out of this dance without the girl who brung us,” he said, referring to Japan and South Korea. “Over the long term, we want to come out of this with stronger alliances.”

In addition, the United States quickly needs an ambassador to South Korea and State Department roles must be filled, Magsamen and Green said.

“The most important thing for our alliance relationships is steadiness and clarity and that is where, unfortunately, the administration has suffered from some strategic incoherence,” Magsamen said. Also, “we don’t have an ambassador in South Korea. That significantly hobbles our ability to engage with our allies and it’s really important we get one immediately.”

An additional route to consider, Magsamen emphasized, is the appointment of a special White House representative to head up North Korea talks. Magsamen also said the United States must push back on North Korean or Chinese efforts to split our alliances, which has happened in the past year.

“If the United States is serious about diplomacy with North Korea ...we need some sort of a senior envoy from the White House with the credibility and backing of the president who is able to engage on a full-time basis,” she said. Don’t give “North Korea and China options to split us from our allies. I think we’ve done that a couple times over the last year and that deeply wounds us and wounds our strategy.”

Sen. Martin Heinrich, D-N.M., said it was clear from Tuesday’s testimony that the United States has plenty of work to do in Asia to head off an attack.

“There is an enormous difference in relative risk regarding escalation between something that would be retaliation for bad North Korean behavior versus something that would be preemptive,” he said. “Our first priority in getting this right, especially for the long term, should be having a unified strategy with our allies in the region.”

Green said he remains optimistic the U.S. diplomacy losses in Southeast Asia can be reversed, and points to other positive developments. For example, the United States has revived the so-called Quadrilateral Initiative in talks with Japan, India and Australia on security cooperation.

“We can recover and the bigger maritime powers are with us,” he said.