



Will Donald Trump Start Second Korean War? Wild Gamble Would Risk Lives And Safety Of Millions

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While visiting the Republic of Korea I've found a few South Koreans who like Donald Trump and believe he will work well with newly elected South Korean President Moon Jae-in. But they are a distinct minority. Far more fear that the U.S. chief executive could recklessly if unintentionally trigger the Second Korean War, which America has sought to prevent for the last 64 years.

If you listen to U.S. officials, the Korean peninsula is a tinderbox. The president warns of the chance of "major, major conflict." Secretary of State Rex Tillerson repeatedly intoned that "all options are on the table" when discussing North Korea. The Pentagon backed this threat of war by sending a carrier battle group off North's coast.

It's hard to assess whether President Donald Trump is serious about going to war. He has no constitutional or legal authority to attack North Korea.

A majority of Americans say they are "uneasy" with his approach. Moreover, South Korean and Japanese assent would be necessary for Washington to use American forces stationed on their soil — unlikely given the potentially catastrophic consequences of starting the Second Korean War.

For the last quarter century a nuclear North Korea was prospect rather than reality. No longer. The North is believed to possess enough nuclear material for 20 bombs today and may accumulate enough material for 100 by 2024. With Pyongyang developing long-range missiles, the U.S. appears destined to face a small but potent North Korean nuclear deterrent.

The possibility is disconcerting, to say the least, even though there is no reason to believe that the North's 33-year-old Kim Jong-un is suicidal. Still, who wants to rely on his good judgment to keep the peace, especially when matched against the equally impulsive and unpredictable Donald Trump?

What to do? Unfortunately, negotiation is a dead end, at least to achieve full denuclearization. Indeed, in promoting regime change against Libya's Moammar Khadafy after he dropped both his nuclear and missile programs, the U.S. sent the North an unmistakable message: don't trust American promises.

The Trump administration declared the era of "strategic patience" to be over. An internal review apparently recommended a policy of "maximum pressure" on the North. But how?

Sanctions could be strengthened, though without Chinese cooperation they are unlikely to force Pyongyang to change course. Beijing is not happy with the North's behavior but remains more concerned about the dangers of a North Korean implosion and creation of a united Korea with American troops on its border.

The Trump administration offered better trade terms to the People's Republic of China to assist the U.S. However, sweetening the pot by addressing the PRC's political and security concerns would increase the chance of reaching a deal.

Finally, military action is possible. Over the years a number of policymakers, analysts, and journalists suggested attacking the North's nuclear facilities.

It is a bad idea. The best that can be said for military strikes is that they would be a wild gamble. Only someone living a continent away with an ocean in between would voluntarily take the risk of triggering a major war.

Despite casual talk questioning Kim Jong-un's sanity, he is behaving logically. Nukes offer a number of benefits, including protection against foreign attempts at regime change.

Serbia, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya all lacked the ability to do much harm to the U.S. Indeed, by abandoning his nascent WMD capabilities Moammar Khadafy essentially surrendered to his enemies. A nuclear arsenal would offer Pyongyang security—indeed, the ability to hit the American homeland could end the U.S.-South Korean alliance.

Hence proposals for a preventative strike. But it might not be possible to destroy the bulk of the North's unconventional military assets. The DPRK has added underground facilities. Washington cannot reach them all or even be certain of their location.

Advocates of military action contend that Kim & Co. would acquiesce to a limited assault lest the regime be swept away in a wider war. Alas, especially after Libya, Pyongyang is unlikely to view allied assurances as having much value.

Pyongyang could retaliate with limited strikes intended to divide the U.S. and South Korea. Washington might find itself at odds with South Koreans who blamed the Trump administration for triggering the conflict.

Worse, the North could view any American assault as a prelude to a full-scale invasion, warranting an all-out response. In recent years Washington has rarely gone to war without regime change or similar radical transformation as its objective.

So North Korea isn't likely to hold back and hope for the best. Thae Yong-ho, the North Korean Deputy Ambassador to the United Kingdom who defected last year, argued that Kim Jong-un "will press the button on these dangerous weapons when he thinks that his rule and his dynasty are threatened."

Simply waiting to assess events would put Pyongyang at a significant disadvantage. Much of its conventional forces have the character of "use it or lose it," since U.S. bombing and droning would quickly degrade the North's capabilities. As a result, an American attack could become an almost automatic trigger for full-scale war.

A Second Korea War would be horrific. Seoul is located roughly 35 miles from North Korean military forces, a great tragedy of Korean geography. The consequences of war could hardly be anything but catastrophic.

Some war advocates insist that U.S. technological superiority would limit the depredations wreaked by North Korea's military. However, noted the Heritage Foundation's Bruce Klingner, the North is "a nuclear-armed state that likely already has the ability to target South Korea and Japan with nuclear weapons, and has a million-man army poised across the DMZ from South Korea."

The North also possesses chemical and biological weapons. Its missiles can hit South Korea and Japan and U.S. bases. Gen. Luck warned that another Korean conflict might result in a million casualties and a trillion dollars in destruction.

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Of course, the Trump administration could be threatening military action as a bluff designed to convince North Korea to yield and China to cooperate. However, the longer the Trump administration promises action while doing nothing, the less credible its current stance and future threats will be.

The U.S. has spent more than 60 years attempting to maintain peace on the Korean peninsula. That should remain Washington's paramount objective. Triggering the very war which America has so long sought to prevent would be a tragic perversion of current policy.

Ironically, the danger to the U.S. reflects more America's than North Korea's aggressiveness. National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster said Trump "will take action" if North Korea continues to threaten America.

But militarily Washington has been threatening the DPRK for nearly 70 years. For good reason, American officials argue, but the threat always has run from Washington. Kim's government is building weapons and promising to use them because the U.S. has intervened in his neighborhood, promising to defend the South, stationing a garrison in South Korea, and routinely deploying other forces, such as aircraft carriers and bombers, to threaten Pyongyang. If Washington didn't plan to intervene in the Korean Peninsula, the DPRK would have little reason to pay much attention to America.

President Trump recently announced: "if China is not going to solve North Korea, we will." That has been taken as a military threat, though administration officials denied an NBC report (calling it "crazy" and "wildly wrong") that they planned to attack if the North conducted another nuclear test. Still, the military temperature in Northeast Asia has risen sharply.

Instead of plotting war with the DPRK, U.S. policymakers should reconsider America's role on the peninsula. Washington should engage the North in an attempt to reduce tensions and threats, even if Pyongyang initially refuses to discuss dismantling its nuclear program. Isolation has achieved nothing.

Moreover, the ROK should take over its conventional defense. U.S. forces should come home. If the North continues its nuclear program, Seoul should consider developing its own nuclear deterrent.

Finally, the administration should attempt to win Beijing's assistance in dealing with the North. Washington needs to address China's geopolitical concerns over the possibility of a messy collapse and united Korea allied with America.

There is no magic solution to the North Korea Problem. But military action should be a last resort, reserved for preempting a real, direct, and imminent threat to America. The DPRK poses no such danger. Washington should continue searching for peaceful strategies to address the Korean imbroglio rather than risk triggering the Second Korean War.

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