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

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One of the favorite phrases used by U.S. officials is “all options are on the table.” It was a barely veiled threat of war favored by the Obama administration when talking about Iran. Now Secretary of State Rex Tillerson is using it overtime against North Korea. National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster recently picked up the phrase as well.

The Pentagon backed the threat by sending a carrier battle group off the North’s coast. On Sunday McMaster opined: “I think [the deployment] should make clear to the North Korean regime that it is in their best interest to stop the development of these [nuclear] weapons, to stop the development of these missiles, and to denuclearize the peninsula,” he said.

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. If Washington employed military forces from elsewhere to attack, triggering retaliation by the North, the alliance relationships would be wrecked. Neither Seoul nor Tokyo would appreciate President Trump sacrificing their peoples because of a theoretical threat against America.

For the last quarter century a nuclear North Korea was prospect rather than reality. There always seemed to be time to stop, with words or actions, Pyongyang from building a bomb. No longer. The North is believed to possess enough nuclear material for 20 bombs today and may accumulate enough material for 100 by 2024.

In this Saturday, April 15, 2017, file photo, a submarine missile is paraded across Kim Il Sung Square during a military parade in Pyongyang, North Korea to celebrate the 105th birth

anniversary of Kim Il Sung, the country's late founder and grandfather of current ruler Kim Jong Un. (AP Photo/Wong Maye-E, File)

North Korea's development of an intercontinental missile appears to be moving along a similar timeline. It's hard to predict exactly when—and how dependable and accurate such an ICBM will be. However, the U.S. appears destined to face a small but potent North Korean nuclear deterrent.

The possibility is disconcerting, to say the least. There is no reason to believe that the North's 33-year-old Kim Jong-un is suicidal. However, he appears impetuous and confrontational. Who wants to rely on his good judgment to keep the peace, especially when matched against the equally impulsive and unpredictable Donald Trump?

Moreover, a nuclear Pyongyang would dramatically constrain U.S. military options in the region. That wouldn't be entirely bad—South Korea should have taken over responsibility for its conventional defense years ago, and perhaps now should build a countervailing nuclear weapon. Still, Northeast Asia would be a far more dangerous place.

What to do? Unfortunately, negotiation is a dead end, at least to achieve full denuclearization. It's unclear if the Democratic People's Republic of Korea ever was willing to abandon its nuclear ambitions. However, that chance almost certainly disappeared. Few people believe the DPRK will give up its nukes voluntarily. 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. Pyongyang cited the recent attack on Syria as providing another "lesson" on the need for "strength."

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 and has seemed more ready than before to penalize its difficult ally. However, the People's Republic of China 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 could target Chinese as well as North Korean banks and firms, though that would risk the U.S.-China relationship. The administration offered better trade terms to Beijing for assisting the U.S., but sweetening the pot by addressing the PRC's political and security concerns would increase the chance of reaching a deal.

Replicas of a North Korean Scud-B missile (C) and South Korean Hawk surface-to-air missiles are displayed at the Korean War Memorial in Seoul on March 6, 2017. (JUNG YEON-JE/AFP/Getty Images)

Finally, military action is possible. Over the years a number of policymakers, analysts, and journalists suggested attacking the North's nuclear facilities. In fact, a quarter century ago Defense Secretary William Perry and Assistant Defense Secretary Ashton Carter prepared an attack plan for President Bill Clinton; how close he came using it is disputed. The late South

Korean President Kim Young-sam claimed he dissuaded Clinton from striking: “there would be no inter-Korean war while I was president,” Kim said he told Clinton.

It was a bad idea then. It’s an even worse idea now. 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. Even paranoids have enemies: He is determined to maintain control irrespective of the cost to his own people. A nuclear capability offers international status and extortion opportunities. Nukes help cement military support domestically. Most important, a nuclear arsenal offers 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. So far the DPRK’s significant conventional retaliatory capacity, artillery and Scud missiles targeting Seoul, has protected Pyongyang from a similar fate. That might not be enough in the future, however. A nuclear arsenal would offer 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. Anything above ground is vulnerable and deep penetration munitions, such as the Mother of All Bombs, extend America’s reach. However, the DPRK has added underground facilities. Washington cannot reach them all or even be certain of their location. Moreover, one quick strike wouldn’t likely be enough. The worst outcome would be an ineffective or inadequate attack, which would reinforce the North’s determination to acquire a nuclear deterrent.

Advocates of military action contend that Kim & Co. would acquiesce to a limited assault lest the regime be swept away in a wider war. Indeed, they suggest, the government might simply say nothing, attempting to keep the news from its own people. The totalitarian system would survive, but would no longer threaten North Korea’s neighbors and America.

U.S. Navy crew members guide an F/A-18 Super Hornet fighter takes off from the deck of USS Aircraft Carrier Ronald Reagan on October 14, 2016 in West sea, South Korea. (Song Kyung-Seok-Pool/Getty Images)

Alas, Pyongyang is unlikely to view allied assurances as having much value. Secretary Tillerson opined: “North Korea must understand that the only path to a secure, economically prosperous future is to abandon its development of nuclear weapons, ballistic missiles, and other weapons of mass destruction.” Like Libya? Khadafy believed similar promises from the U.S. (and European governments), and he lost not only his position but his life. The North said at the time that it would never put itself in a similar position.

Pyongyang could retaliate with limited strikes intended to divide the U.S. and South Korea. Assume the U.S. acted against the wishes of the ROK government. The North might announce with “reluctance” a limited bombardment of Seoul, nominally aimed at U.S. military facilities. If no more attacks were made on North Korea, the DPRK might explain, hostilities would end,

hopefully to be followed by negotiations on a peace treaty. Pyongyang might suggest that the South expel American forces as Washington found 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 change as its objective. That was the case in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya. Even in the less aggressive years before 9/11 the U.S. overthrew governments in Grenada, Haiti, and Panama. In Somalia there was no political order to destroy, so the Clinton administration attempted to capture a leading warlord, the equivalent of regime change. In Serbia the administration dismantled the country while leaving its government intact, later backing successful domestic efforts to oust dictator Slobodan Milosevic. Kim Jong-un could be forgiven for expecting similar terminal treatment at Washington's hands.

Thus, he 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." Knowledgeable Americans fear the same. A couple decades ago Gen. Gary Luck, U.S. Commander in South Korea, warned: "If we pull an Osirak, they will be coming south." The Heritage Foundation's Bruce Klingner, who formerly served in the CIA, recently opined: "A U.S. military attack against production or test facilities of North Korea's nuclear or missile programs could trigger an all-out war."

Moreover, the DPRK would have good reason not to yield the initiative to America. Countries that awaited events—Serbia, Afghanistan, Iraq—lost in short order. Reports from defectors suggest that the North believed Iraq mistakenly remained on the defensive in the first Gulf War. Explained high-ranking defector Cho Myung-chul, the military concluded "If we're in a war, we should attack first, to take the initiative."

The US nuclear powered aircraft carrier USS George Washington arrives at the southeastern port city of Busan on July 11, 2014. North Korea reacted angrily to the arrival of the 97,000-ton supercarrier for a joint salvation exercise with South Korea and Japan off the Korean peninsula in late July, calling it a serious provocation. (JUNG YEON-JE/AFP/Getty Images)

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. Indeed, if Pyongyang suspected that an attack was imminent, it might seek to preempt the U.S., gaining at least a temporary advantage.

The Second Korea War would be horrific. Seoul is located roughly 35 miles from North Korean military forces, a tragedy of Korean geography. The province of Gyeonggi, which surrounds Seoul, is the country's population, industrial, and political heart. 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. Analysts disagree on the reach of North Korean artillery,

ability to neutralize Pyongyang's threats, and total harm likely caused. Still, noted 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, Japan, and American bases, if not the U.S. Pyongyang also has special operations forces that likely can invade the South via tunnels under the DMZ. While attacking tanks and soldiers would offer a turkey shoot for allied forces, they might be numerous enough to reach Seoul and beyond where they would wreak murder and mayhem.

Thus, concluded Adm. Scott Swift, head of the US Pacific Fleet: "Any military leader would be a fool to suggest swift victory." Gen. Luck warned that another Korean conflict might result in a million casualties and a trillion dollars in destruction. Stanley Kurtz of the Hudson Institute worried that failing to stop Pyongyang from responding would be a "disaster" since "Short of rapid and total success, we face the deaths of hundreds of thousands, even millions, of South Koreans."

Despite past military ties, Beijing is unlikely to back the DPRK in aggression against the South. Nevertheless, China might aid its small neighbor in response to a U.S. attack without obvious provocation—that is, an imminent threat to strike America.

U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson talks with Chinese President Xi Jinping after he arrived at Palm Beach International Airport April 6, 2017 in West Palm Beach, Florida. (Joe Raedle/Getty Images)

During the current stand-off, Beijing chided both sides. Said Foreign Minister Wang Yi: "The United States and South Korea and North Korea are engaging in tit for tat, with swords drawn and bows bent, and there have been storm clouds gathering." In China's view everyone should stand down: "We urge all parties to refrain from inflammatory or threatening statements or deeds to prevent irreversible damage to the situation on the Korean Peninsula."

Although the Xi government is angry with the North for its provocative and destabilizing activities, it still blames Washington for pushing the DPRK into a corner from which it sees nukes as its only security. Moreover, military conflict could harm China in numerous ways—radiation cloud, active combat on its border, catastrophic North Korean collapse, mass refugee flows, and humanitarian crisis. China might seek to hinder Washington's operations.

Of course, the Trump administration could be threatening military action as a bluff designed to convince North Korea to yield and China to cooperate. Indeed, the revelation that the USS Carl Vinson is operating in the Indian Ocean rather than rushing toward the western Pacific as previously stated by the administration suggests that Washington's continuing warnings to the North are more bark than bite. If successful, such a strategy would deliver results at low cost. 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. NSA 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 the U.S.

Kim's government is building weapons and promising to use them against America because Washington has intervened in the North's 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.

This photo taken on February 12, 2017 and released on February 13 by North Korea's official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) shows the launch of a surface-to-surface medium long-range ballistic missile Pukguksong-2 at an undisclosed location. (STR/AFP/Getty Images)

From the DPRK's perspective it is attempting to deter Washington from its warlike designs on Pyongyang. Consider Kim's speech to party members, in which he declared: "since the signing of the Armistice Agreement the United States has persisted in sending huge forces of aggression to south Korea and the surrounding region, and conducted frenzied nuclear war exercises against the north year after year, aggravating tension on the peninsula and in the region." The obvious response by the North is to develop the capacity to attack the American homeland.

The push for nonproliferation is equally one-sided from Pyongyang's viewpoint. UN Ambassador Nikki Haley declared: "The global community needs to understand that every country is in danger from the actions of North Korea." But that is nonsense. After all, Kim Jong-un does not spew threats against the United Kingdom, Spain, Nigeria, South Africa, Brazil, Indonesia, or anyone else other than South Korea and Japan, long-time adversaries, and America, allied with the foregoing.

In a new essay being circulated by the North Korea's Foreign Ministry, researcher Kim Kwang-hak wrote: America's "assertions are based on the logic that there is no problem with thousands of nuclear weapons and the delivery systems possessed by the existing nuclear powers and with those deployed in the places where the nuclear powers have interests in, while the nuclear weapons possessed by the DPRK for the purpose of the self-defense should never be allowed." Although the North's desire for a nuclear deterrent is dangerous, it should surprise no one.

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.

This photo taken on February 12, 2017 and released on February 13 by North Korea's official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) shows North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un (C)

surrounded by soldiers of the Korean People's Army as he inspects the test-launch of a surface-to-surface medium long-range ballistic missile Pukguksong-2 at an undisclosed location. (STR/AFP/Getty Images)

Moreover, the ROK should act as the influential and prosperous nation it has become and take over its conventional defense. U.S. forces should come home, removing America from the midst of the potential conflict. If the North continues its nuclear program, Seoul should consider developing its own nuclear deterrent.

Finally, the administration should initiate more serious negotiations with Beijing to win the latter's assistance in dealing with the North. President Trump said he told Chinese President Xi Jinping: "You want a great [trade] deal? Solve the problem in North Korea." However, Washington also 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 today. Washington should continue searching for peaceful strategies to address the Korean imbroglio rather than risk triggering the Second Korean War.

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