



America's Language of Mass Destruction Convinces Nobody

Presidents love making threats. They don't work.

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U.S. President Donald Trump was reportedly upset with North Korea's latest military parade, especially the many missiles and mobile launchers. He seems unlikely to return to the "fire and fury" days of 2017, but renewed missile testing by Pyongyang is the logical next step for the large new intercontinental ballistic missile that was dramatically unveiled—as is an unpredictable response from Trump.

The threat of military action has become a constant of U.S. foreign policy toward the North. Retired Gen. Vincent Brooks, a recent commander of U.S. Forces Korea, argued for continuing to threaten military action against North Korea. Presidents should insist that "all options are on the table," he contended. He didn't want war, he emphasized, but the threat should be part of the mix.

The presumption of the "all options are on the table" school is that such threats scare foreign leaders, deter them from taking provocative actions, and cow them into accepting American demands. The reality, however, has always been very different.

Over the years, a stream of policymakers have proposed military strikes on North Korea. Presidents long have implicitly or explicitly threatened preventive war. Both Bill Clinton and Donald Trump reportedly came close to ordering strikes.

North Korea, of course, isn't the only target of such threats. Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama repeatedly insisted that war was a possibility in confronting Iran over its possible nuclear ambitions. When visiting Israel in 2013, Obama declared that "All options are on the table." He added: "We will do anything to make sure Iran doesn't get a nuclear weapon." He concluded, with calculated understatement, that a diplomatic solution would be better.

Very often this language is backed by military maneuvers. In March 2013 the Obama administration sent B-2 stealth bombers over South Korea. U.S. Forces Korea asserted that doing so "demonstrates the United States' ability to conduct long-range, precision strikes quickly and at will."

Four years later, Trump was involved in a highly publicized battle of insults with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and announced: “We are sending an armada, very powerful. We have submarines, very powerful, far more powerful than the aircraft carrier, that I can tell you. And we have the best military people on Earth. And I will say this. He is doing the wrong thing. He is doing the wrong thing.”

Lest any foreign leader be so stupid or ignorant as to disbelieve such warnings, the arrival of U.S. warplanes or naval vessels is supposed to shock the target regime out of its overconfident stupor—a 21st-century version of gunboat diplomacy. Thus, if Kim and his associates unaccountably didn’t realize that the Pentagon fielded planes and ships able to reach the Korean Peninsula, the arrival of the president’s armada off their coast would set them straight. What could Kim do at that point but surrender?

Except he didn’t.

American policymakers seem to have little doubt in the efficacy of constantly threatening to bomb, invade, and occupy other nations. It doesn’t sound quite as lurid as the North Korean announcement of plans to turn South Korean, Japanese, or American cities into a “lake of fire.” In 2013 Pyongyang even issued a video imagining such an attack on New York City. But in practice U.S. warnings amount to the same thing. When I first visited the North in 1992 my interlocutors talked about having to completely rebuild Pyongyang in 1953, after it was reduced to rubble by American air attacks.

However, there’s no evidence that the bloviations of Washington policymakers achieved anything. North Korea has not stopped developing nuclear weapons and missiles, including ICBMs and submarine-launched ballistic missile, both capable of hitting the United States. The George W. Bush administration’s invasion of Iraq, which of course had no nuclear or chemical weapons, apparently encouraged Tehran to offer to discuss all issues with Washington, which was roughly rebuffed. After this, Iran stepped up its nuclear (though not explicitly nuclear weapons) activities, despite continued U.S. threats of military action.

Trump administration sanctions backed by military warnings to Iran in language sometimes as blood-curdling as Pyongyang’s—a few days ago Trump declared: “they know if they do anything against us they’ll pay a thousand-fold”—have only encouraged Iranian nuclear activity, steadily shortening the theoretical breakout time. Iran also has harassed Persian Gulf oil traffic, struck Saudi petroleum facilities, and encouraged attacks on the U.S. Embassy and American bases in Iraq by Iranian-backed militias, as well as maintained support for Hamas, Hezbollah, the Yemeni Houthis, and Bashar al-Assad’s government in Syria. The president’s latest warning came after Secretary of State Mike Pompeo publicly complained—whined, really—about the possibility of having to close America’s enormous embassy in Iraq if that government did not better protect it from attack.

North Korea and Iran clearly have taken their measure of Trump. To his credit, he appears to be risk-averse in practice, despite his attempt to project an image of the baddest dude with the biggest gun. However, there is no evidence that his predecessors’ threats were more effective.

If the problem was simply failure, that is, that the warnings and demonstrations were ignored, the effort would be wasted but otherwise harmless. But the endless succession of heated rhetoric and military sorties are actively counterproductive, likely to convince all but the most pacific or brainless North Koreans and Iranians that Washington might at any moment attempt to impose regime change, commit murder and mayhem, and play some mix of conquistador, gauleiter, colonist, and imperialist, and therefore must be resisted.

After all, that is America's record. As the Soviet Union entered terminal decline, the United States became the world's most aggressive world power. Washington attacked Panama, Iraq, Bosnian Serbs, Serbia, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya. It threatened Haiti with invasion. Intervened in Somalia against warlords and Iraq and Syria against the Islamic State. Undertook massive and multiple drone campaigns in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia, and Yemen. And supported countries and groups against Syria (along with its backers Iran and Russia) and Yemen.

Only in the case of the 2003 Iraq invasion was the war presented as an effort to disarm a potential nuclear power. The Libyan war was particularly noteworthy: *After making a deal* with Muammar al-Qaddafi, who relinquished his chemical weapons and missiles and ended his nascent nuclear program, the United States and Europe took him out when he was vulnerable. The obvious lesson of this bellicose record is that disarmament is for fools.

Do American policymakers seriously believe that foreign dictators seeking nuclear weapons, building missiles, and creating proxy forces will voluntarily yield their weapons and trust in sweet nothings whispered in their ears by Western diplomats? Every new threat is another argument for speeding up existing programs and developing new weapons to establish military deterrence. Washington placing all options on the table likely encourages target regimes to work even harder to ensure that they also can put all options on the table. As has Kim, who today could deliver nuclear weapons on targets throughout East Asia and perhaps in the United States.

Washington's endless threats pose another danger. Constant belligerent rhetoric, backed by corresponding military deployments, likely make officials in target regimes more sensitive to the possibility of attack. American conventional superiority gives credibility to the "all options" mantra. My 1992 North Korean hosts were quite aware of Washington's vast military power even then after watching the first Gulf War. U.S. capabilities have since multiplied. It is obvious to decisionmakers in Pyongyang that if they give the American military time there won't be much of a North Korean military left. This would put pressure on Pyongyang to strike early.

And that requires discerning U.S. intentions. In late 2017, Trump was threatening "fire and fury" and moving military assets nearby. His unpredictability was evident while his reluctance to act was not yet. Congress took a hawkish stance toward North Korea. Sen. Lindsey Graham, an intimate of the president, dismissed concerns over a nuclear war, since it would be "over there" rather than "over here," he explained. What if, as tensions rose, a maladroit mix of aggressive rhetoric, incessant threats, and menacing deployments wrongly convinced Pyongyang that Washington was going to act? The North might decide to preempt and strike first, perhaps with a

limited attack backed by the promise of more if the allies did not stand down. Such a step would be suicidal, but waiting for attack would also be deadly for the regime.

Most striking may be the presumption of the “all options are on the table” crew that Americans are unique, the only people on earth willing to stand up for themselves, determined to resist threats, and prepared to spend whatever is necessary for their defense. A couple centuries ago, newly independent Americans, in what was then a pipsqueak power among great European empires, insisted “millions for defense, but not one cent for tribute” in dealing with the Barbary states in the Mediterranean. There is no reason to suppose that peoples with whom the United States deals today are any less brave and truculent when threatened by outsiders. Nor is there any evidence that menacing words and gestures from Washington cause foreigners to embrace it over their own governments—especially when the latter emphasize nationalist sentiments.

While reaffirming its readiness to respond overwhelmingly against attack, Washington should stop promiscuously threatening war. The possibility, even probably, of a U.S. attack is a powerful incentive for other countries to better arm themselves, and especially to acquire weapons of mass destruction. It is not just the United States that can put “all options on the table.”

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