

## **No, Let's Not Invade North Korea**

*A new North Korea policy is wanted, but that isn't it.*

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A strategy review document under development in the White House considers a broad range of options for U.S. policy toward the North Korea, *The Wall Street Journal* [reports](#), from American acceptance of Pyongyang as a nuclear power to a pre-emptive U.S. strike on route to forcible regime change.

The Trump administration's apparent interest in military action against the isolated totalitarian regime — further evidenced by the *Journal's* account of U.S. officials repeatedly broaching the subject during the recent state visit of Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe — made headlines, and rightly so. It would mark a dramatic departure from policy precedent.

Of course, change is not inherently negative, especially where the United States' stagnant and often counterproductive foreign relations are concerned. The Trump team deserves credit for thinking outside the box in what is unquestionably a complex and ethically fraught situation. Nevertheless, pre-emptive U.S. military intervention in North Korea would be a grave mistake.

The appeal, of course, is undeniable. North Korean dictator Kim Jong-un presides over what is fairly [labeled](#) “the rape and defilement of an entire nation, a systematic and refined evil that only the human genius at its most perverted can produce.” The impulse to liberate North Koreans from the abuses they suffer and rid the globe from the scourge that is their government is admirable.

But good intentions are not the same as good policy, and a preemptive military strike on Pyongyang would be imprudent at best — and more likely disastrous.

The risks are manifold, from [war with China](#) to chemical or biological [weapons strikes](#) on the United States or her allies to the very real possibility that Kim — aware that his conventional warfare prospects would be nil in the face of a coming American onslaught — would decide to go out with a (nuclear) bang. The most obvious rationale for Kim's pursuit of the bomb is “to ensure that anyone considering imposing regime change won't take the risk,” reasons Harry J.

Kazianis at *The Week*. “If Washington ever decided it was time to take the regime down, what reason would Pyongyang have from holding back? None.”

The likely aftermath doesn't look much better. It is naïve to believe Americans would be welcomed to a conquered Pyongyang with open arms. After decades of ceaseless propaganda and deprivation, we don't really know how North Koreans would respond to foreign intervention. (Recall, for example, the defector who had to unlearn her conviction that Kim Jong-il could read her mind.) South Koreans have little appetite for reintegration with their northern neighbors and thus may not be the nation-building partner Washington would wish.

If war is off the table for dealing with Pyongyang's steady stream of provocations — most recently, this weekend's missile test launches into the Sea of Japan and the assassination of Kim's half-brother, Kim Jong-nam — is there a better option that could still satisfy Trump's not unreasonable interest in a new approach to Korea?

There is, and it offers Trump an opportunity for exactly the sort of wheeling and dealing he so enjoys. “Washington needs to acknowledge China's interests,” in the situation, argues the Cato Institute's Doug Bandow, a former special assistant President Ronald Reagan. In this case, China's interests include “avoiding both a failed state in chaos and a united Korea allied with America hosting U.S. troops on its border.”

Beijing is undoubtedly aware of both these risks, and the White House should leverage that awareness to “try to make a deal, to use Trump-speak,” Bandow says, suggesting Washington “accept the potential of the Chinese installing a pliant regime, offer to help care for refugees, promise to withdraw U.S. forces from a united Korea, and accept a neutral unified peninsula.” Those may be the ultimate terms, but Trump could easily start smaller, say, by offering to remove U.S. military involvement from disputes over the South China Sea. China's recent decision to comply with a United Nations resolution by suspending coal imports to North Korea suggests Beijing may already be fed up with Kim's antics and primed to negotiate.

The Trump White House is smart to seek out creative solutions to North Korea, but military intervention offers far more risk than gain. Still, if Trump is as open to new ideas as this strategy review suggests, perhaps he can see his way to a freer and safer Korea by means of deals and diplomacy instead of war.