



American Lives Matter – But Are They All That Matter?

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The Korean peninsula is heating up again. North Korea launched seven missiles in January. All were short-to-medium range, but Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un hinted that he might restart ICBM and nuclear tests.

And he's not negotiating with America. After the collapse of the 2019 Hanoi summit, Kim essentially cut contact with both the US and South Korea. He has rebuffed President Joe Biden's requests to talk. Kim launched a verbal attack and another missile after the Biden administration imposed new sanctions in response to the earlier tests.

He might just be playing hard to get, building up his negotiating leverage. However, he also might be playing a longer game, creating a formidable arsenal that would provide both a deterrent against US attack and surplus weapons to trade for sanctions relief.

Reported the Rand Corporation and Asan Institute: "by 2027, North Korea could have 200 nuclear weapons and several dozen intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) and hundreds of theater missiles for delivering the nuclear weapons. The ROK and the United States are not prepared, and do not plan to be prepared, to deal with the coercive and warfighting leverage that these weapons would give North Korea."

That would place the Democratic People's Republic of Korea within the second rank of nuclear powers alongside China, France, Britain, India, and France, and well ahead of Israel. The US would still be secure – there is no evidence that Kim wants to depart this earth atop a radioactive funeral pyre by making a suicidal attack on America. However, the US also would be deterred from intervening, even with conventional forces, in a new Korean war, since Pyongyang could use nuclear weapons as a last resort. Which has some Washington hardliners determined for war now.

In their view, the US should attack North Korea before the latter perfects long-range missiles capable of targeting the American homeland. This was the theory behind President Donald Trump's "fire and fury" campaign in late 2017. However, proposals for preventive war go back decades. Indeed, President Bill Clinton considered just such an attack, at a time when the North's ability to retaliate was much more limited.

The strongest argument against preventive war always has been the likelihood of mass casualties, primarily Korean. For instance, former secretary of defense William Perry and future secretary of defense Ashton Carter wrote of preparing military strikes early in the Clinton administration. However, if the North retaliated, they admitted: "Thousands of U.S. troops and tens of thousands of South Korean troops would be killed, and millions of refugees would crowd the highways. North Korean losses would be even higher. The intensity of combat would be greater than any the world has witnessed since the last Korean War."

Today the North's military capabilities are much greater. Hence the cost of any conflict would be much higher. Writing amid Trump's fire and fury talk, Harry Kazianis of the Center for the National Interest dismissed optimistic plans to take out North Korean nuclear weapons and avoid serious retaliation. Citing wargames, he warned that even though Pyongyang's existing arsenal cannot yet target the continental US, the number of dead in any conflict could still be one to two million.

Those numbers cause most US policymakers to back away from war. However, in a recent webinar presentation John Bolton, one of Donald Trump's national security advisers, made the case for attacking the North to prevent it from perfecting long-range missiles capable of hitting the US.

Bolton cited Gen. Joseph Dunford, chairman of the joint chiefs of staff throughout most of the Trump administration, who emphasized that *American* security was the priority. Argued Dunford at the time: "it is not unimaginable to have military options to respond to North Korean nuclear capability. What's unimaginable to me is allowing a capability that would allow a nuclear weapon to land in Denver, Colorado. That's unimaginable to me. So my job will be to develop military options to make sure that doesn't happen."

In fact, before joining the administration John Bolton unashamedly advocated a first strike:

"Pre-emption opponents argue that action is not justified because Pyongyang does not constitute an 'imminent threat.' They are wrong. The threat is imminent, and the case against preemption rests on the misinterpretation of a standard that derives from prenuclear, pre-ballistic-missile times. Given the gaps in US intelligence about North Korea, we should not wait until the very last minute. That would risk striking after the North has deliverable nuclear weapons, a much more dangerous situation."

Other analysts also beat the drums of war. Economist Kevin James cited the US-USSR Cold War experience, contending that "any US/North Korea deterrence relationship will be highly prone to a catastrophic failure that leads to a nuclear exchange." Thus, he argued, the possibility of an accidental war was too great to rely on deterrence: "a preventive war now is a far better option than recklessly betting the lives of millions of Americans, South Koreans, and Japanese on deterrence roulette."

To Dunford's credit, he admitted that the human cost of military action would be high: "it would be a loss of life unlike any we have experienced in our lifetimes, and I mean anyone who's been alive since World War II has never seen the loss of life that could occur if there's a conflict on

the Korean Peninsula." In contrast, neither Bolton nor James considered, or at least mentioned, the potential for and cost of full-scale war. They might believe that result to be unlikely – that preventive war would be an immaculate operation, in which the Kim regime was unable or unwilling to strike back. Or they might not care about foreigners dying.

The latter appeared to be the case with Trump and Sen. Lindsey Graham, who talked in late 2017. Graham, an advocate of most every war everywhere, irrespective of cost, advocated the military option for dealing with the North. According to NBC:

"Graham said that Trump won't allow the regime of Kim Jong Un to have an ICBM with a nuclear weapon capability to 'hit America.' 'If there's going to be a war to stop [Kim Jong UN], it will be over there. If thousands die, they're going to die over there. They're not going to die here. And He has told me that to my face,' Graham said. 'And that may be provocative, but not really. When you're president of the United States, where does your allegiance lie? To the people of the United States,' the senator said."

For the war-happy senator, the balance appears to be simple. Other people's lives are cheap. A bunch of foreigners are going to die. Ho-hum. Life is tough. If they are in the way of the US protecting itself, too bad. What do a few such lives matter when you are the most powerful country on earth?

Of course, Graham is right that the president's principal allegiance is to the American people. That doesn't mean America's government has no other obligations, however.

First, the number of dead from a preventive war would more likely be hundreds of thousands or millions, rather than the thousands imagined by Graham. Using even the most crude utilitarian analysis, it becomes much harder to justify deliberately taking actions that would harm so many. There is no obligation for America to go to war to save others, but that doesn't provide a blank check for Washington to act in ways that injure others. Especially millions of others. The Hippocratic Oath, first do no harm, would be a good guide for US policy.

Second, Americans would die in large numbers in a new Korean war. The Republic of Korea expects massive military reinforcement from the US in any conflict. There is no reason a nation with the ROK's advantages should not be able to provide for its own defense. However, it relies on Washington, which would deploy tens of thousands of troops. Also present are thousands of American military families, students, businesspeople, and others, who likely would be caught in any conflict. The president has an obligation to them as well.

Third, preventive war would not save American lives. It *might*, under a set of plausible but by no means certain, circumstances, save American lives. How many remains unknowable. For this possibility Washington would most likely trigger a horrific conventional war, probably highlighted by nuclear attacks on civilian targets in South Korea, Japan, and American territories throughout Northeast Asia. This would be a dubious bargain by any measure.

Fourth, the impact on America's global reputation would be catastrophic. Imagine the consequences of the Iraq War, but ten or one hundred-fold. For instance, the Korean peninsula

ravaged. Seoul and Pyongyang in ruins. Pusan wrecked. US bases throughout the region destroyed. Tokyo devastated by nuclear attack. Guam hit with nuclear-tipped missiles. Honolulu too. Nuclear fallout drifting over surrounding nations, including China and Russia. All the result of a US decision to sacrifice the lives, homes, and futures of millions of other people to eliminate the small possibility of future attack on America.

Actively defending against attack can yield horrific consequences – consider what the world looked like after World War II. But that is viewed as unavoidable. In contrast, to initiate such a conflict, and do so without convincing necessity, would make the US an outcast nation. Although there is no global policeman who could arrest American policymakers, a new world order might emerge in which even Europe and other democratic states cooperated with China and Russia to constrain the irresponsible, dangerous North American giant. A huge political price would be paid for an at most uncertain benefit.

North Korea remains a challenging land of bad options, though the greatest danger today might be the temptation of irresponsible warrior wannabes to launch a preventive war. That possibility is reason enough for US disengagement from what amounts to the continuing Korean civil war.

Moreover, the North's growing nuclear arsenal will eventually force Washington to back away from involvement in a conflict in which the American homeland would be at risk. Better to begin the process now, giving Seoul plenty of time to adjust. If South Korea decides that means producing an independent ROK deterrent, so be it. That would be better than holding American cities hostages in the defense of Seoul.

Kim Jong-un is getting confrontational again, and Washington is worried. Better to disengage and let other nations confront the North's military ambitions. America's involvement puts too many lives, US and foreign, at risk.

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