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War With North Korea is not an Option

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The Cold War was marked by hysteria over the potential for nuclear conflict. The world seemed to enter a new age when the Soviet Union collapsed. Small wars continued, but the famed nuclear doomsday clock finally moved backwards.

Yet the possibility of nuclear war again is dominating international headlines. People have begun to share their parents' fear of nuclear warheads raining down upon American cities.

Unfortunately. President Donald Trump's decision to match North Korean Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un threat for threat creates a serious risk of misjudgment and mistake. Peace is not advanced by the two nations' leaders behaving like participants in a cockfight.

Most analysts who know the Korean peninsula realize that war is not an option, other than as unavoidable self-defense. There are a few war advocates—Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-SC) comes to mind—who suggest that a Second Korean War wouldn't be such a big deal because it would not be "over here. " Of course, the U.S. military would be involved in any fight and the North probably has the capability to hit American bases in the region.

Moreover, Pyongyang could loose murder and mayhem on South Korea and Japan. Casualties surely would be at least in the tens of thousands and perhaps many, many more. And if the conflict's impact flowed over the North's borders into China and Russia, Washington would face additional significant geopolitical dangers.

Yet some analysts as well as politicians, like Graham, appear to believe that the only choice is war or living with a dire North Korean nuclear threat against the American homeland. In which case they would prefer war.

Those might appear to be the only choices because the U.S. insists on remaining militarily entangled in Northeast Asia. However, it is Washington's commitment to South Korea which has

brought America into potential conflict with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. So long as the U.S. intervenes militarily to protect the South from the North, the latter will prepare to offset Washington's overwhelming military might with nukes and missiles.

However, nothing requires American troops to remain forever in the Republic of Korea. The ROK was a wreck in July 1953 when the armistice was signed. Today the South vastly outranges the DPRK, enjoying a 45-to-1 economic edge and 2-to-1 population advantage. Long ago South Korea gained the ability to field a military capable of deterring the North and defeating the latter's forces if deterrence fails.

Moreover, without the Cold War context, South Korea no longer matters significantly to U.S. security. A renewed Korean conflict would be a humanitarian tragedy and highly disruptive to Asia, but neither of those problems warrant either triggering a conflagration on the peninsula or making America's homeland a nuclear target.

Of course, the problem of South Korea defending itself against a North armed with nuclear weapons would remain. Yet it still isn't in America's interest to risk Los Angeles, Honolulu, Seattle, Phoenix, and perhaps a host of other cities to defend Seoul—or, frankly, Tokyo, Taipei, and Canberra.

Which suggests that Pyongyang's acquisition of a nuclear arsenal is an appropriate time to consider encouraging nations threatened by the North, most obviously the ROK and Japan, to develop countervailing deterrents. Seoul started down the nuclear path a half century ago before being forced to halt by U.S. pressure. Today the South Korean public wants to finish that journey.

That would force Japanese policymakers and people to consider doing the same to confront growing challenges from the North and People's Republic of China. Beijing then might feel forced to do more to constrain the North's nuclear ambitions to forestall America's friends going nuclear.

In any case, the U.S. would escape the either war or nuclear threat conundrum. There is no reason to believe Kim Jong-un is suicidal. The North seeks to avoid American involvement, not trigger it. Stepping back militarily and allowing prosperous and populous states to take over their own defense surely is better than starting the very war Washington has spent 64 years attempting to prevent.

North Korea is the land of second best solutions, it has been said. But war is far worse than second best.

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