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On North Korea, Rep. Duncan Hunter is hawkish, but experts say he may be miscalculating risks

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After President Donald Trump reaffirmed a pledge to defend the United States and its allies from an attack from an increasingly bellicose North Korea, Rep. Duncan Hunter took it a step further and called for a military takeover of the rogue nation.

“A conventional invasion is what you’re talking, not just a preemptive strike,” Hunter, an Alpine Republican, said in an interview with KGTV/10News.

Hunter has emerged as one of the most hawkish voices in Congress on North Korea, and has recently moved beyond his earlier calls for a first strike against the country to also supporting a full-scale war.

“I would support a declaration of war, if the president asked for it,” Hunter said.

Hunter, a former Marine Corps artillery officer and a member of the House Armed Services Committee, said North Korea’s leader, Kim Jong Un, is irrational. Hunter said military intervention is necessary because of North Korea’s nuclear missile program and threats to attack the United States and its allies with a nuclear warhead. He cited the precedent of the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 over concerns about weapons of mass destruction.

Even conservative analysts who study security on the Korean Peninsula warn that the congressman may be underestimating the number of civilians who would likely be killed by North Korea retaliation for a preemptive strike — and the risk of getting pulled into a long-term military operation.

Eric Gomez, an analyst at the free-market Cato Institute think tank, cautioned that North Korea is likely not as hell-bent on attacking the United States as it seems. Kim Jong Un, while an oppressive leader, is rational enough to foresee that his country would be leveled if he were to attack, Gomez said.

“The decision for North Korea to develop nuclear weapons is clearly a desire to make sure his regime stays alive. And I think he knows that the United States and South Korea have him dead to rights, so he has to find an alternative means to counter that,” Gomez said.

Moving people out of Seoul is technically possible and something South Koreans have trained for, but it could take as long as a week to move a city that large, Gomez said. The logistics would be especially challenging in a country that is under attack with a government that has to devote attention to its own military strikes, he said.

“It would be very difficult, especially if shelling started, for the government to contain the public panic and evacuate people in an orderly fashion,” he said.

Then there would still be a risk that North Korea’s special operations forces would also infiltrate South Korea where they could launch attacks against people or strategic targets like power plants, Gomez said.

Bruce Klingner, a senior research fellow at the conservative Heritage Foundation, said it would make more sense to strike first when the intelligence community is clear that North Korea has prepared an actual attack against the U.S. or its allies. The outcome would be certain — North Korea would be destroyed, he said.

“When I participated in war game simulations when I was in CIA, the alliance always prevailed, but at the cost of hundreds of thousands of casualties and that was before we assessed that North Korea had nuclear weapons. More recently, the Pentagon has estimated there would be 20,000 deaths per day in a conflict with North Korea.”

Hunter has said that South Koreans would not be killed because they would flee to safety in underground shelters or southern stretches of the peninsula. Analysts say that’s unlikely to prevent a tremendous number of civilian deaths.

Evacuations or shelters wouldn’t do much to protect South Koreans, said Loren Thompson, the chief operations officer at the center-right Lexington Institute.

“First of all, half of the South Korean population, a total of 25 million people, are near the range of North Korean artillery. And, of course, North Korea has numerous missiles that could be launched into the South’s capital, or beyond,” Thompson said.

He said he agrees with a preemptive strike “in principle” because it could proactively protect the United States and allies, but he also cautioned that there is no way to know how many civilian casualties would occur when North Korea retaliates by attacking its neighboring countries.

While Hunter has been aggressive, and his call for an attack unpopular, his stance tells North Korea that Trump has allies on Capitol Hill, Thompson said.

“Congressman Hunter’s views probably match up well with the president,” Thompson said. “I think that there’s a value in having a congressman warn North Korea that Washington isn’t just talking, but it might actually do something concrete and destructive.”

A Gallup poll last month found that 58 percent of adults in the United States who were surveyed said they would favor military action if diplomacy fails first.

Hunter has not said whether he believes diplomatic options have been exhausted and a first strike is now imminently necessary, but he has said that efforts to deter North Korea have been ineffective.

“We’ve been acquiescing to North Korea and doing sanctions and trying to do things with them and for them, and around them, for three or four presidencies now,” Hunter said in a September interview with KUSI. “For 20 or 30 year’s we’ve been playing this game, and they’ve been getting closer and closer, and now have a nuclear weapon that they can deliver to the us and our allies. That’s the way life is now.”

While Hunter has made some of the most direct calls for military action against North Korea, there have been earlier demands for similar strikes across the political spectrum.

In a 2006 Washington Post column Ashton Carter and William Perry called for the United States to attack North Korean missiles as they sat on their launch pads. Perry was secretary of defense when Bill Clinton was president, and Carter would serve in that post under President Barack Obama. They later backed down on their calls to attack North Korean missiles.

Others, including Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-South Carolina, and Sen. Bob Corker, R-Tennessee, have also recently made statements supporting a preemptive strike.