



The US should give peace a chance when it comes to North Korea

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On Wednesday, President Trump will host all 100 members of the Senate at the White House for an extraordinary briefing on North Korea's nuclear program. Given all the saber rattling so far, it would not be surprising to hear Trump issue more warnings to North Korea. In just the past week National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster and Vice President Mike Pence have both warned that "all of our options are on the table" regarding North Korea's burgeoning nuclear program.

Stern sounding words, certainly, but in fact their statements were in keeping with an American foreign policy tradition. In 2011, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton promised that "all options were on the table" to keep Gaddafi from using military force against civilians in Libya. And in 2008 while running for office, Barack Obama said he would "take no options off the table" to keep Iran from developing nuclear weapons.

The years of repetition by both political parties makes it pretty clear that the United States wants its adversaries to know that, well, all options are on the table. Unfortunately, they aren't.

The truth is that "all options are on the table" has simply become the most popular shorthand for threatening the use of force if things don't go America's way. A search of the Factiva U.S. newspaper database reveals that since 2001 the phrase has appeared in almost 5,000 stories. What's even more telling, however, is the trend. In the fifteen years before 9/11, the New York Times and Washington Post combined to use the phrase 62 times. Since then they've used the phrase 427 times. And thanks to the Trump administration's saber rattling about North Korea, the phrase has been used over three times as often during the Trump administration as it was during the Obama administration.

Why are politicians so keen to threaten the military option? One would imagine that the past 15 or 16 years of costly and counterproductive military effort in the Middle East would have cured most people of the habit. The unfortunate answer is that since 9/11 Washington has become addicted to the use of military force. At this point Republicans and Democrats alike believe that the "big stick" is necessary to ensure productive diplomacy.

The threat of force can, under some circumstances, induce concessions. But threats are only credible if the United States is willing to carry them out. American threats against North Korea,

however, have always been empty because a military strike would be too risky. Ballistic missiles and nuclear weapons aside, hundreds of North Korea's long-range conventional artillery pieces sit within easy striking distance of Seoul, South Korea, a city of 10 million people. A U.S. strike could lead to catastrophic retaliation by North Korea.

Some might argue that America's leaders talk tough because they believe the public prefers aggressive responses to international threats. Hawks might point, for example, to polls that show a majority of Americans support the military campaign against ISIS, or to a September 2015 CNN/ORC poll that found 64 percent supported the United States taking military action if Iran violated the terms of the JCPOA nuclear deal aimed to halting Iran's nuclear weapons program.

When it comes to North Korea, however, the polls tell a different story. In an April 2017 Marist poll, despite the fact that most Americans view North Korea as a "major threat," 69 percent think the United States should use diplomacy compared to just 23 percent who believe the U.S. should take military action.

More fundamentally, the hawkish "all options" approach is out of step with how Americans think the United States should conduct foreign policy. Americans have long believed diplomacy is more useful than military strength. Since 1994 the Pew Research Center has asked Americans whether "good diplomacy" or "military strength" is the "best way to ensure peace." Americans have chosen good diplomacy over military strength by an average of 58 to 32 percent. In 2015, the margin was 62 to 30 percent. Even when the issue in question is deadly serious, like nuclear proliferation, Americans choose diplomacy. In a series of CBS/New York Times polls between 2006 and 2013, for example, when given a choice between using military force to stop Iran from developing nuclear weapons or continuing with diplomacy, just 17 percent chose the military option.

In light of the risks and costs of military intervention and the public's strong preferences, it's time for the Trump administration to give diplomacy a chance. When U.S. leaders say, "all options are on the table" all options really should be on the table. The United States may not get everything it wants through diplomacy, but a failure of diplomacy will be less costly than a crisis that escalates out of control thanks to aggressive rhetoric.

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