



## **Ahead of Trump-Kim summit, GOP senator wants Congress to approve NK 'military option'**

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As President Donald Trump set out on what he called a "mission of peace" in Singapore, a top Republican senator is mobilizing members of Congress to approve an authorization for the use of military force (AUMF) against North Korea.

Arguing the use of force would be a "last resort," South Carolina Sen. Lindsey Graham said President Trump needs a credible threat of military action in order to achieve U.S. objectives in denuclearization talks with North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un.

"If diplomacy fails, Democrats and Republicans need to put the military option on the table or we'll never get a good deal," Graham said in a Sunday interview with ABC's This Week. He indicated that he has drafted a war authorization in the event denuclearization talks with North Korea fail.

"The goal is to eliminate their nuclear missile program, not contain it," he said. "So there's really only two options: peace or war."

The threat of military action has always been a factor in the U.S.-North Korea relationship, but some are questioning Graham's approach, warning a war authorization will make conflict more likely.

Last week, a group of seven Democratic senators sent a letter to President Trump in support of the complete disarmament of North Korea's nuclear and missile programs outlining what they believe would constitute an acceptable nuclear agreement. The recommendations largely follow the outline of the Iran nuclear deal, which Trump pulled out of last month.

The Democrats outlined five principles and goals for U.S. diplomacy and policy regarding North Korea, largely consistent with the Trump administration's stated goals:

1. No sanctions relief from the United States or its allies until North Korea's nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs are dismantled and removed.
2. Complete verifiable denuclearization of North Korea. That includes a complete declaration of its nuclear activities, removing all nuclear weapons and military-related fissile materials from the country, ending the military production and enrichment of uranium and plutonium, and permanently dismantling North Korea's nuclear weapons infrastructure.
3. The dismantlement of North Korea's ballistic missile program and a prohibition on future ballistic missile development or technology exports.
4. "Anywhere, anytime" inspections of North Korea's nuclear-related sites and facilities, as well as non-declared suspicious sites. Failure to comply with the inspections would lead to snap-back sanctions.
5. All the steps toward denuclearization must be permanent in nature.

Graham applauded the Democrats' recommendations but argued the agreement they described could only be reached if the Trump administration has a credible military threat on the table.

"I'm asking every Democrat who wrote that letter and all my Republican colleagues to tell North Korea and China that if diplomacy fails, we will have the president's back," Graham told Fox News on Sunday. "We will authorize the use of military force as a last resort to stop the nuclear threat in North Korea to the American homeland and the world at large. And if we're not willing to do that, we're never going to get a good deal."

If members of Congress fail to authorize war, "they're undercutting the president and really stabbing him in the back, which means we're more likely to have a war," Graham claimed.

The top Democrat on the Foreign Relations Committee, Sen. Bob Menendez of New Jersey, dismissed Graham's call as premature. "I think first we need a chance at peace," he said on ABC This Week, adding until it was clear "the path for peace is not attainable" he would not authorize the use of force.

"I can't just jump on to give the president the authority to have a switch in which he can engage in an attack, nuclear or otherwise, against North Korea," Menendez said.

In the House, fifteen Democratic lawmakers led by California's Rho Khanna sent a letter to Trump on Monday encouraging diplomacy and advising against a return to military threats.

The lawmakers said they "vehemently opposing any return to the threat of illegal and unacceptable military action" if diplomacy with North Korea fails.

"We once again must remind you that in the unfortunate event of a setback or collapse in talks, you do not have the authority under the U.S. Constitution or U.S. law to strike North Korea," they wrote. Absent a congressional declaration of war or "sudden attack," the lawmakers argued Trump cannot legally carry out a military strike on North Korea.

According to President Trump, the stakes at the Tuesday summit are extremely high. Before leaving for Singapore, Trump said Kim Jong-Un has one opportunity to take advantage of his administration's diplomatic outreach. "It's a one-time shot," Trump told reporters.

Trump said he would know "in the first minute" if Kim is serious about ending his nuclear weapons program. If not, the president reiterated he is willing to walk away from the talks.

Abandoning diplomacy would be the worst-case outcome of the Singapore Summit, said James McKeon a policy analyst at the Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation.

"The biggest concern about a failed summit is that President Trump walks out, or if there is some kind of failure in diplomacy that we'll be on another track to war," he explained.

Less than a year ago, the president was threatening "fire and fury" against North Korea. As recently as February, the White House was reportedly pressing the Pentagon for additional military options to disable North Korea as a nuclear threat. Kim Jong-Un was regularly testing ballistic missiles and threatening to destroy the United States.

Those activities and the rhetoric have been on pause since South Korea began peace talks with the North ahead of the 2018 Winter Olympics. Those peace talks led to further discussions, including Tuesday's historic Singapore Summit.

This more stable dynamic could quickly evaporate if the Congress were to authorize military action against North Korea, experts warned.

"Giving a blank check to President Trump to be able to use military force on the Korean Peninsula — which is basically what an AUMF would do — would not strengthen his negotiating hand," said James McKeon. "It would tell the North Koreans that their biggest fears of a U.S. invasion could actually come to fruition. It would undermine the talks."

In recent weeks, the Trump administration has been signaling its intent to defend and even enrich North Korea if the regime takes tangible steps to denuclearization.

On Monday, hours before the scheduled Trump-Kim meeting, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo told reporters that the United States would offer North Korea unprecedented security assurances. The security assurance would be "different" and "unique" from what America offered in the past, he said, so the North Koreans "can be comfortable that denuclearization isn't something that ends badly for them."

For Congress to draft and authorize military action would be "counterproductive to diplomacy" and potentially undermine those security guarantees, McKeon warned.

Doug Bandow, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, said Graham's proposal is "madness," warning a congressional declaration of war would most likely set off an unpredictable escalation.

"If you convince the North Koreans you really are about to strike, everything becomes hair trigger," he said.

If they believed a U.S. attack was imminent, North Korea would most likely take a "use it or lose it" approach with their nuclear weapons, Bandow added. "To the extent they think we might really be about to attack, they have an incentive to preempt. So this could be an extraordinarily dangerous situation."

A military conflict on the Korean Peninsula would be "catastrophic," according to Defense Secretary James Mattis. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Joseph Dunford said such a war would result in "a loss of life unlike any we have experienced in our lifetimes."

The United States has roughly 25,000 troops in South Korea, 50,000 in Japan and roughly 7,000 on the U.S. territory of Guam.

According to one estimate from analysts at 38North, a nuclear exchange on the peninsula could result in more than 2 million casualties. North Korea also maintains a massive chemical weapons arsenal. The Bulletin for Atomic Scientists estimated a 240-ton sarin attack on Seoul would result in 2.5 million casualties.

Even if the North Koreans did not deploy any of its weapons of mass destruction, the U.S. government has estimated American and South Korean casualties from a conventional exchange across the demilitarized zone would be in the hundreds of thousands.

Moreover, the Pentagon warned last year, that even with a decapitation strike against the North Korean regime, the only way to secure North Korea's nuclear sites is through a massive ground invasion.

When the stakes of an attack are so high, Bandow argued it is difficult to portray a U.S. military threat as credible.

The U.S. military could take out the North Korean regime, "but the question is are you prepared to risk hundreds of thousands of lives on that," he noted. "It's not clear to me that the credible threat is credible."

Mattis said the Pentagon continues to provide the White House with a range of military options for addressing the North Korean nuclear threat. "The hopes are ... riding with the diplomats," he told reporters after the Shangri La Dialogue in Singapore earlier this month.