



War is no option even if the Korean summit fails

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The summit with North Korea is back on. But if the Trump-Kim tete-a-tete goes badly, what is needed is more diplomacy, not war, as the administration suggested.

President Donald Trump beat the war drums loudly last year. He sounded a lot like Kim Jong-un when threatening to visit "fire and fury" upon the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. Sen. Lindsey Graham led the Greek chorus amplifying the president's threats.

Never mind the consequences of a Second Korean War. "Japan, South Korea, China would all be in the crosshairs of a war if we started one with North Korea," Graham admitted. But "If there's going to be a war to stop [Kim], it will be over there. If thousands die, they're going to die over there. They're not going to die here," he explained.

The prospect of a summit between President Trump and Supreme Leader Kim halted the talk of war. But a couple weeks back Graham began spewing threats anew.

He declared that "If [the North Koreans] don't show up that means diplomacy has failed." Which in turn "puts us back on the path to conflict. It would be time to take American families and dependents out of South Korea." Or if the North Koreans "do show up and try to play Trump, and that means military conflict is the only thing left."

But, he promised: "they will lose it, not us."

Shortly thereafter North Korean officials objected to John Bolton's talk of the "Libya model," which resulted in the ouster of Moammar Gadhafi after he agreed to close his missile and nuclear programs. Bolton was involved in negotiating the surrender of Gadhafi's weapons and later called for the U.S. military to take out the Libyan leader.

The president also responded with a threat: "If you look at that model with Gadhafi that was a total decimation, we went in there to beat him ... that model will take place if we don't make a deal [with Kim] most likely." Vice President Mike Pence followed suit, warning that the North could "end up like the Libya model ended if Kim Jong-un doesn't make a deal."

The argument for war is wrong-headed. First, there is no dangerous new North Korea "threat" to the U.S. For 65 years deterrence has prevented the North from attacking South Korea again. Pyongyang now wants a deterrent so it does not end up as Libya.

There is no evidence that Kim is irrational. To the contrary, he, like his father and grandfather, appears to prefer his virgins in this world. Indeed, deterrence worked against Joseph Stalin's Soviet Union and Mao Zedong's People's Republic of China. Both were far larger, more powerful, and much scarier than the DPRK.

Second, it would be a massive gamble with other people's lives to assume that Kim would acquiesce to an American attempt to destroy his most important weapons or decapitate his regime. Almost any military response likely would lead to full-scale war.

While Graham, and the president, if Graham is to be believed, might be unafraid of a conflict "over there," a quarter of a million Americans live or visit the Republic of Korea every day. U.S. military personnel would die in combat, as well as from possible missile attacks on Guam and Okinawa, home to additional American forces.

The Clinton administration predicted as many as one million casualties when it considered attacking the North's nuclear facilities in 1994. Defense Secretary Jim Mattis, no liberal defeatist, warned that such a war would be "probably the worst kind of fighting in most people's lifetimes."

Assuming a few of North Korean latest weapons survived initial U.S. attacks, the DPRK could unleash extensive artillery on the South Korean capital of Seoul as well as missiles topped with biological, chemical, and nuclear weapons against multiple targets, perhaps even including Tokyo.

Third, even limited steps would increase U.S. security. For instance, a permanent freeze on nuclear and missile tests would prevent the Kim regime from perfecting its weapons.

War with Iraq was not a cakewalk as predicted, but it would be a cakewalk compared to conflict on the Korean Peninsula. The possibility of military confrontation makes it more important for the summit to succeed.

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