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A Bad Korean Menu

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The North Korean regime of Kim Jong Il is evidently impatient. Having received few benefits and little attention from the West in recent months, Pyongyang bombarded a South Korean island, killing four people. But

impatience is rising in the United States as well. Americans frustrated with the North's continuing misbehavior are looking for new solutions. Some analysts see military action as the right remedy.

The Korean peninsula's division was forged in war. Two hostile regimes arose after the United States and Soviet Union divided the former colony into separate occupation zones. The Korean War, in which roughly two million people died, created a bloody gulf between the two states.

Despite occasional efforts to negotiate with Washington, Seoul and Tokyo, Pyongyang has perfected a policy of brinkmanship. North Korea routinely has created a crisis to raise tensions, only to then offer talks in exchange for benefits of one or another. This strategy worked particularly well when the Kim Dae Jung and Roh Moo Hyun governments generously subsidized the Democratic People's Republic of Korea as part of the Sunshine Policy.

However, South Koreans eventually ran out of patience with the North, which repaid aid with obloquy and hostility, capped by acts of war this year. President Lee Myung-bak ended the subsidies when he took office two years ago.

Tokyo essentially dropped engagement as a policy when Pyongyang refused to come clean on its kidnapping of Japanese citizens over the years. Talks over recognition and aid collapsed.

American officials are no less frustrated. The Bush administration swung wildly between refusing to acknowledge North Korea's existence to enthusiastic engagement. The result was the same: no change in the DPRK's behavior. The Obama administration sought to put the North on the backburner, but Kim's nuclear test in 2009 and military provocations this year made that impossible.

Now the situation is increasingly dangerous. Pyongyang was willing to risk war by sinking a South Korean naval vessel and shelling an island occupied by civilians. Although citizens of the Republic of Korea were strangely quiescent after the ship attack, they erupted when South Korean territory was targeted. President Lee is under enormous pressure to respond vigorously to any new DPRK provocation. No one wants war, but mistake or miscalculation could easily trigger a serious crisis, if not widespread conflict.

Throughout the Cold War, America's overriding objective was to protect South Korea's independence. The United States succeeded, repelling the North Korean invasion and deterring any renewal of hostilities. In recent years the ROK has raced past North Korea in every measure of national power other than military force, and any deficiencies in the latter are a matter of choice. The South has had no need to further close that gap since it could rely on American protection.

Washington made one attempt to liberate the North, after allied forces had reversed the North Korean invasion in late 1950. But Chinese intervention resulted in two and a half more years of war and military stalemate. Now liberation has reemerged as a possible objective, given the allies' overwhelming military superiority and China's presumed

willingness to leave the DPRK to its fate in another conflict.

For instance, Jonah Goldberg broached the topic in a confused column entitled "Save the North Koreans!" which called regime change "the only conceivable remedy for North Korea's plight." But Goldberg then backed away from calling for military action.

Writer William Tucker recently urged a joint U.S.-China invasion: "They come in from the north, we come in from the south." Then ten years of joint occupation, after which American forces come home. It brings to mind the proposal a few years back from author Bruce Gilley that Beijing do the fighting while "The United States and its allies in Asia should provide diplomatic and logistical support to the operation, while the U.N. should provide its legal blessing."

Most serious is Michael Mazza of the American Enterprise Institute, a Washington think tank noted for backing aggressive military policies. He called for "a campaign to steadily reduce North Korea's ability to conduct military operations outside of its borders." Targets would include missiles, artillery positions along the demilitarized zone, submarine berths, and possibly nuclear facilities.

In Mazza's view such attacks obviously would degrade the DPRK's ability to project force and discourage Kim Jong Il from future assaults. Moreover, "The campaign might also make Beijing—sure to be distressed by the projection of U.S. military power so close to its borders—reconsider its never-faltering support for the Kim regime." Although Kim could decide "let's roll," as a rational actor, Mazza argues, the Dear Leader likely would do nothing lest he lose any ensuing war.

In truth, regime change is the only sure answer to Pyongyang's human-rights violations and military provocations. But the same could have been said for the Soviet Union, Maoist China, and a host of communist and other authoritarian states around the globe. Unfortunately, the price of intervening in those nations also would have been unacceptably high.

As the United States has learned in Iraq, even "easy" military victories come with a high price, especially to the people being liberated. Washington lit the fuse of a conflict which has killed tens or hundreds of thousands of people, and is not yet over. Nor are the consequences of destabilizing an already tense region yet concluded.

The North, as a highly militarized state, poses a special problem. Its armed forces are decrepit, but numerous. The DPRK has 1.1 million men under arms. It deploys more than three thousand five hundred main battle tanks, nearly six hundred light tanks, and some two thousand five hundred armored personnel carriers. It has eighteen thousand artillery pieces, many dug in along the DMZ.

The latter are thought capable of pouring three-to-five hundred thousand artillery shells per hour into Seoul, located around thirty miles from the border—the capital environs have crept north over the years. Seoul is the political and economic heart of the ROK. Ten million people live in Seoul alone, and 24.5 million, nearly half of the country's population, reside in the Seoul National Capital Area.

North Korea also has Scud missiles capable of hitting the South. Pyongyang's longer-range missile and nuclear capabilities remain far more modest, though the uncertainty is not entirely reassuring.

The likelihood of the People's Republic of China invading the North, either by itself or in conjunction with America, is less than faint. The DPRK is a problem for Beijing, but not one the PRC is likely to believe warrants an unnecessary war and an invitation to the United States military to move closer to China's border. Even if "victory" came easily, Beijing could not be certain that there would be no longer-term resistance. After all, Washington was surprised when Iraqis started shooting bullets and setting off bombs rather than tossing flowers and sharing candies.

Worse, an invasion would make the North, then ravaged by war as well as misgovernment, the PRC's responsibility. The financial obligations would be substantial; the geopolitical complications even worse. If a Chinese official proposed military action against North Korea, he likely would be voted off the Communist Party Central Committee and laughed out of Beijing.

The United States would run into similar problems if it invaded the North. Without doubt, Kim & Co. would resist regime change with everything at their disposal. Victory would come at very high cost, especially to the ROK. And Washington could not be certain of China's response. The PRC almost certainly would not back a North Korean invasion south, but might not be as cooperative if America initiated hostilities moving north. While Beijing would be unlikely to directly enter the war, it might aid the DPRK. And future relations between China and the U.S. undoubtedly would be complicated, with a potentially negative impact on other issues of concern to Washington, such as Iranian sanctions, proliferation policies and Taiwan's status.

Mazza's proposal for more limited attacks is simultaneously more reasonable and more irresponsible. Kim obviously would be less inclined to retaliate if he believed his regime was not threatened. But that's not how he might interpret American military strikes.

After all, the United States routinely uses overt military force (not to mention covert action) to overthrow governments and dismember nations it doesn't like: Grenada, Panama, Haiti (twice in a decade), Somalia (under warlord rule), Bosnian-Serb territories, Serbia, Iraq and Afghanistan in recent years.

If Washington launched strikes seemingly intended to disable the North's chief deterrent capabilities, to project force, Kim might reasonably conclude that it was the start of a campaign leading to regime change. Fearing he was forced to use it or lose it, he might choose the former, hoping that a combination of luck, Chinese support and international opposition to Washington's unprovoked attack might preserve his rule.

Moreover, U.S. military action, especially if directed at the DPRK's nuclear facilities—Kim's major accomplishment—would threaten his prestige and perhaps his power. The pressure to do something, especially from the military, would be intense in the best of circumstances.

And these are not the best of circumstances. There are significant uncertainties in Pyongyang resulting from the looming leadership transition. Kim's health problems, along with his attempt to transfer power to his son, have enhanced the military's already powerful influence. With many other actors scrambling for advantage in advance of any power vacuum, inaction might not be an option.

Nor would Pyongyang have to roll the tanks in response. The North might announce an hour-long bombardment of Seoul in retaliation for America's attacks. But, the Kim regime might explain, it would then be finished so long as the United States did not renew its "criminal aggression." South Koreans, suffering thousands or tens of thousands of casualties and economic devastation, might well take the DPRK's side.

One could imagine an argument that all these risks still were worth the end of the North Korean regime. But Mazza would roll the dice merely to degrade Pyongyang's military capabilities. A modest good, to be sure, but one worth setting Seoul aflame?

Unsatisfactory though it might be, keeping peace on the peninsula should be everyone's, and especially the South's, overriding objective. Military action of any sort would be extremely dangerous, since even a "victory" could and—given the unstable dynamics on the peninsula today—likely would result in widespread death and destruction. Pyongyang obviously hides behind this threat, but it remains a powerful deterrent.

This doesn't lead to a South Korean policy of pacifism. Seoul could very well believe that the only way to maintain an effective deterrent of its own would be to retaliate in response to any new North Korean provocations. Indeed, if the ROK took over responsibility for its own defense, as it should, it might decide that it would be worth the risk to defang some of the DPRK's military capabilities, since the North would be less likely to fear an ensuing attempt at regime change. However, if Seoul did so, it should bear the entire risk of war, and not expect the United States to intervene if the ROK judged wrong.

Some day the DPRK, or at least its current malignant regime, will pass away. The smartest strategy is to wait. Unfortunately, tolerating a government that so mistreats its own people and threatens regional peace is the best of a set of bad choices. Starting a war is the worst.

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