

Will President Trump Start the Second Korean War?

Secretary of State Rex Tillerson says “all options are on the table” regarding North Korea. The Pentagon backed his threat of war by sending a carrier battle group off the North’s coast.

The North is believed to possess enough nuclear material for 20 bombs today and may accumulate enough material for 100 by 2024. With Pyongyang developing long-range missiles, the U.S. appears destined to face a small but potent North Korean nuclear deterrent.

What to do?

The Trump administration declared the era of “strategic patience” to be over. An internal review apparently recommended a policy of “maximum pressure” on the North. But how?

Sanctions could be strengthened, though without Chinese cooperation they are unlikely to force Pyongyang to change course. The Trump administration offered better trade terms to the People’s Republic of China to assist the U.S.

However, Beijing remains more concerned about the dangers of a North Korean implosion and creation of a united Korea with American troops on its border. Washington needs to address those concerns as well.

Finally, military action is possible. It would be a wild gamble: Only someone living a continent away with an ocean in between would risk triggering a major war.

Despite casual talk questioning Kim Jong-un’s sanity, he is behaving logically. Nukes offer protection against foreign

attempts at regime change.

Serbia, Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya all lacked the ability to do much harm to the U.S. A nuclear arsenal would offer Pyongyang security—indeed, the ability to hit the American homeland could end the Korean alliance.

Hence proposals for a preventative strike. But it might not be possible to destroy the bulk of the North's unconventional military assets, which are buried deep underground.

Advocates of military action contend that Kim & Co. would acquiesce to a limited assault lest the regime be swept away in a wider war. However, Pyongyang likely would view any American assault as a prelude to a full-scale invasion, warranting an all-out response. Thae Yong-ho, a North Korean diplomat who defected last year, argued that Kim Jong-un “will press the button on these dangerous weapons when he thinks that his rule and his dynasty are threatened.”

Simply waiting to assess events would put Pyongyang at a significant disadvantage, since U.S. bombing and droning would quickly degrade the North's armed forces. As a result, an American attack could become an almost automatic trigger for full-scale war.

Seoul is located roughly 35 miles from North Korean military forces. Any conflict would be horrific.

Some war advocates insist that U.S. technological superiority would limit the damage. However, noted the Heritage Foundation's Bruce Klingner, the North is “a nuclear-armed state that likely already has the ability to target South Korea and Japan with nuclear weapons, and has a million-man army poised across the DMZ from South Korea.”

The North also possesses chemical and biological weapons. Its missiles can hit South Korea and Japan and U.S. bases. Analysts warn of casualties in the hundreds of thousands or

more.

The U.S. has spent more than 60 years attempting to maintain peace on the Korean peninsula. That should remain Washington's paramount objective.

Ironically, the danger to the U.S. reflects more America's than North Korea's aggressiveness. Kim's government is building weapons and promising to use them because the U.S. has intervened in its neighborhood, promising to defend the South, stationing a garrison in South Korea, and routinely deploying other forces, such as aircraft carriers and bombers, to threaten Pyongyang. Otherwise the DPRK would have little reason to pay much attention to America.

Instead of plotting war with North Korea, U.S. policymakers should reconsider America's role on the peninsula. Washington should engage the North in an attempt to reduce tensions and threats, even if Pyongyang initially refuses to discuss dismantling its nuclear program.

Moreover, the ROK should take over its conventional defense and U.S. forces should come home. The South also should consider developing its own nuclear deterrent.

Finally, the administration should attempt to win Beijing's assistance in dealing with the North. Washington needs to address China's geopolitical concerns over the possibility of a messy North Korean collapse.

There is no magic solution to the North Korea Problem. But military action should be a last resort, reserved for preempting a direct and imminent threat that doesn't presently exist. Washington must avoid triggering the Second Korean War.

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