

Whitehall Report 4-17



# Preparing for War in Korea

Malcolm Chalmers



Royal United Services Institute  
for Defence and Security Studies

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# Executive Summary

- The UK government should continue to work with others to intensify international sanctions on North Korea and to support efforts to achieve nuclear restraint through diplomatic means.
- War is now a real possibility. With North Korea making rapid progress in its missile and nuclear programmes, time is not on diplomacy's side. US President Donald Trump and his senior officials have said that America will not tolerate a North Korean ICBM threat to its territory and citizens, and that 'classical deterrence theory' is not applicable. The president has told the UN that 'Rocket Man [Kim Jong-un] is on a suicide mission for himself and for his regime'.
- The war could start in a variety of ways: North Korea could strike first if it believed that the US were moving towards a surprise attack; or a US attack might be triggered by North Korean test missiles hitting the ocean near Guam or California.
- If war were to begin, it is likely to involve a large-scale US-led air and cyber offensive at an early stage, followed by massive North Korean retaliation against South Korea and US bases in the region, using conventional, chemical and possibly nuclear weapons. In these circumstances, a full-scale invasion of North Korea would be highly likely.
- Casualties in such a conflict would likely reach the hundreds of thousands, even if no nuclear weapons were used. There could be far-reaching consequences for the global economy, involving sustained disruption of vital supply chains and markets.
- If the US were to launch a preventive strike without South Korea's agreement, it would be seen as signifying a willingness to 'sacrifice Seoul to protect New York'. Together with pressure from China, it would make it more likely that US troops would have to leave Korea as part of a post-war settlement.
- The UK government should urge the US to reject proposals for preventive strikes, while preparing to respond to a range of possible military – and other – scenarios. In doing so, it should pay particular attention to the views of South Korea and Japan.

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# Introduction

**I**N RECENT YEARS, North Korea has made considerable progress in acquiring a capability to threaten the 48 lower states of the US with nuclear-armed missiles. It may already have the capability to hit South Korea and Japan, and possibly also Guam and Alaska. The Pentagon's Defense Intelligence Agency now reportedly estimates that North Korea is on course to produce a 'reliable, nuclear-capable ICBM' programme by the end of 2018, allowing it to move into assembly-line production shortly thereafter.<sup>1</sup>

At the same time, North Korea is thought to be making rapid progress in developing the range of supporting capabilities that are also needed for a credible strategic nuclear force, such as a larger stockpile of fissile material, solid-fuel engines, mobile missiles and miniaturised warheads. It is now believed that North Korea will shortly carry out re-entry vehicle tests, designed to demonstrate its capability to protect the warhead from the intense heat involved in the final stages of a missile's trajectory. A sixth underground nuclear test has taken place, with a much higher yield than in previous tests, confirming that North Korea has made progress towards a thermonuclear bomb.<sup>2</sup> Pyongyang is also exercising the various components of its capabilities – military units as well as hardware – so that it will be ready to use them rapidly in a crisis.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, its capabilities for threatening immediate neighbours continue to grow, and its nuclear arsenal is projected to grow from between 13 and 30 at the end of 2016 to between 25 and 60 by 2020.<sup>4</sup> It might expand further – perhaps to as many as 80 – by the mid-2020s.<sup>5</sup>

In response, the US administration has been united in issuing a series of scarcely veiled threats of military action if North Korea does not desist. President Donald Trump has made clear that he has not ruled out the possibility of preventive strikes. In addition to threatening 'fire and fury ... the likes of which this world has never seen before',<sup>6</sup> he is reported to have said that:

We can't let a madman with nuclear weapons let on the loose like that. We have a lot of firepower, more than he has times 20, but we don't want to use it ... I hope China solves the problem. But if China doesn't do it, we'll do it.<sup>7</sup>

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1. Ellen Nakashima, Anna Fifield and Joby Warrick, 'North Korea Could Cross ICBM Threshold Next Year, U.S. Officials Warn in New Assessment', *Washington Post*, 25 July 2017.
  2. Jeffrey Lewis, 'Welcome to the Thermonuclear Club, North Korea', *Foreign Policy*, 4 September 2017.
  3. Jeffrey Lewis, 'North Korea is Practicing for Nuclear War', *Foreign Policy*, 9 March 2017.
  4. David Albright, 'North Korea's Nuclear Capabilities: A Fresh Look', Institute for Science and International Security, 28 April 2017; Deb Riechmann and Matthew Pennington, 'Estimates of North Korea's Nuclear Weapons Hard to Nail Down', *Washington Post*, 18 August 2017.
  5. Assuming up to five additional weapons produced annually between 2020 and 2025, less five used in further tests. For further detailed analysis, see Albright, 'North Korea's Nuclear Capabilities'.
  6. Peter Baker and Choe Sang-Hun, 'Trump Threatens "Fire and Fury" Against North Korea if it Endangers U.S.', *New York Times*, 8 August 2017.
  7. Quoted in Gideon Rachman, 'North Korea and the Dangers of America First', *Financial Times*, 26 June 2017.

On this issue, the president's rhetoric is also being reflected in increasingly consistent statements by key administration officials and senior military officers. On 22 July, for example, General Joseph Dunford, chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the most senior military adviser to the president, told the Aspen Security Conference that:

[A Korean war] would be horrific, and it would be a loss of life unlike any we have experienced in our lifetimes, and I mean anyone who's been alive since World War II has never seen the loss of life that could occur if there's a conflict on the Korean Peninsula.

But as I've told my counterparts, both friend and foe, it is not unimaginable to have military options to respond to North Korean nuclear capability. What's unimaginable to me is allowing a capability that would allow a nuclear weapon to land in Denver, Colorado. That's unimaginable to me. So my job will be to develop military options to make sure that doesn't happen.<sup>8</sup>

More recently, even as the UN Security Council moved to adopt increasingly tough sanctions against North Korea in September, National Security Advisor General H R McMaster made clear that Kim Jong-un is 'going to have to give up his nuclear weapons, because the president has said that he is not going to tolerate this regime threatening the United States and our citizens with a nuclear weapon'.<sup>9</sup>

This suggests that the US is prepared to maintain the option of preventive strikes against North Korean nuclear facilities despite the knowledge that these could result in a new Korean war, perhaps comparable in scale and loss of life with the conflicts in Iraq or even Vietnam.<sup>10</sup> The scale of such a conflict could be even greater if North Korea were able to unleash a nuclear attack on South Korea or Japan before its forces were overrun, or if China became directly involved in the fighting. While the broader political and economic effects of such a conflict are highly unpredictable, they are likely to be global in nature, dwarfing the effects of the 9/11 attacks and their aftermath in Afghanistan and Iraq. For the two Koreas, casualties could run into the hundreds of thousands. China and Japan, the world's second- and third-largest economies, could face severe disruption to their societies, especially if nuclear weapons were used or if a conventional war were to last for several months. US leaders also know that a war could put 60,000 American troops based in the region at risk, along with many tens of thousands of American civilians.

Public discussion of military options by the US leadership is designed to increase pressure on North Korea, which would be the biggest loser, as well as on China, whose unwillingness to cut

8. Nahal Toosi, 'Dunford: Military Option for North Korea not "Unimaginable"', *Politico*, 22 July 2017.

9. David Nakamura and Anne Gearan, 'US Warns that Time is Running out for Peaceful Solution with North Korea', *Washington Post*, 17 September 2017.

10. The Vietnam War is estimated to have resulted in some 1.6 million battle deaths, of which around half were civilian. Stephen Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: A History of Violence and Humanity* (London: Penguin, 2011), p. 267. In addition to large numbers of combat deaths on all sides, the Iraq War is estimated to have resulted in around 200,000 civilian casualties between 2003 and 2017. See Iraq Body Count, 'Documented Civilian Deaths from Violence', <<https://www.iraqbodycount.org/database/>>, accessed 10 September 2017.

off vital oil supplies to its erstwhile ally continues to limit the effectiveness of international sanctions. Pyongyang may yet be convinced that such a threat is credible, and it may respond by slowing the pace of its programme, perhaps even accepting a testing moratorium in return for scaling back US military exercises in South Korea. At present, however, North Korea appears to be willing to ignore US threats, believing – as indeed do most informed observers – that Washington would never be willing to deliver on a threat that could lead to such catastrophic consequences.

North Korea might be right. However, it is also possible that new developments – for example the launch of a North Korean ICBM into the eastern Pacific or a further test of a larger-yield warhead – might convince Trump that he is not prepared to preside over the exposure of the US population to a permanent risk of nuclear attack from Pyongyang, and that the time for diplomatic alternatives has ended.

In these circumstances, there would be a powerful military imperative for acting sooner rather than later, and in a manner that minimises the scale of likely retaliation. In doing so, US military leaders would also keep a close eye on North Korean defence preparations, looking for potential vulnerabilities – of key facilities or personnel – that might reduce the extent of effective retaliation. The exact timing of an attack could be determined by these operational considerations.

US domestic political calculations are likely to play a role. President Trump has shown that he is keenly aware of the impact of his actions on his popularity rating. His unexpected decision to authorise a limited air strike against Syria in April 2017, in response to President Bashar Al-Assad's use of chemical weapons, led to a temporary improvement in his approval ratings.<sup>11</sup> War against North Korea might produce a similar outcome, at least in the short term, rallying public support behind the commander-in-chief and dividing his Democratic opponents. He could, no doubt, emphasise that he was prepared to take a tough decision that former President Barack Obama, who was wary of military adventures, would never have taken. He might also believe that it would be difficult for the mainstream media to maintain their focus on his past ties with Russia when US forces were fighting and dying in a Korean war.

At a more ideological level, the use of force against North Korea would be consistent with the president's 'America First' approach to foreign policy, which puts US national interests above multilateral cooperation and the constraints of international law, is more sceptical of soft power as a policy instrument, and prioritises increased emphasis on the role of military force in supporting national interests. This approach has already been reflected in the decisions to withdraw from the Trans-Pacific Partnership negotiations and the Paris Agreement on climate change. Trump may also be close to taking a decision on whether to undermine the nuclear deal with Iran, as part of a more robust approach to that country, and in defiance of the views of key European allies.<sup>12</sup>

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11. Amanda Woods, 'Most Americans Approve of Trump's Strike Against Syria: Poll', *New York Post*, 10 April 2017.

12. Jana Winter, Robbie Gramer and Dan de Luce, 'Trump Assigns White House Team to Target Iran Nuclear Deal, Sidelining State Department', *Foreign Policy*, 21 July 2017.

A decision to attack North Korea, seeking to protect the US from a possible future threat, even if this risks devastating attacks on regional allies, would be the most striking demonstration of America First so far, defining a Trump presidency just as surely as the Iraq War did for President George W Bush.

# I. Could Deterrence Work?

**N**ORTH KOREA IS already a nuclear power, and it is making steady progress towards acquiring a capability for striking the continental US with long-range missiles. Successive efforts to divert Pyongyang from this path – involving engagement and rewards, isolation and sanctions, and now a growing threat of military force – have failed. In the absence of a preventive military strike, it is now likely that by the early 2020s North Korea will have the capability to launch a nuclear attack on the lower states and major cities of the US.

This would not be the first time that the US has faced the acquisition of nuclear weapons by a state whose foreign policy was based on confrontation with the US, led by a dictator who had committed mass atrocities against his own people. This was the case with the Soviet Union and China during the Cold War. Yet, in the end (and in the case of China after serious consideration was given to preventive strikes), the US reluctantly accepted that it had no choice but to accept the emergence of both the Soviet Union and China as nuclear-weapon states.<sup>1</sup> Today, Russia and China remain the only two potentially hostile states that could threaten the US with nuclear attack. The US is not comfortable with this reality, but it has learned to live with it. It may yet decide that the uncertainties of mutual deterrence with a third adversary would be preferable to the likely consequences of a new Korean war.

The case for deterrence as the central element of a fall-back option is clear. The North Korean regime is brutal and immoral in the treatment of its own people. While the rest of the region – both communist and capitalist – has been enjoying rapid growth in popular living standards over a long period, North Korea's people have fallen increasingly further behind regional norms. Recent Bank of Korea estimates suggest that, despite a 2016 upturn after the 2015 drought, total North Korean GDP still amounted to only 2% of that of South Korea, with per capita GDP estimated at \$1,340, compared with \$26,100 for South Korea. Even this comparison may be unduly flattering in relation to living standards, given the high proportion of resources that North Korea is devoting to its defence and security programmes.<sup>2</sup>

Yet, viewed in terms of its own interests rather than those of its people, the regime's commitment to acquiring a strategic nuclear capability is arguably rational. It has sought such a capability consistently since the early 1980s, despite the considerable economic and political costs involved, because it believes that it will help protect the communist regime – built around the Kim family – from the external threats which it believes it has faced since the armistice at the end of the Korean War. The regime correctly believes that it lives in a world where it is

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1. William Burr and Jeffrey T Richelson, 'Whether to "Strangle the Baby in the Cradle": The United States and the Chinese Nuclear Program 1960–64', *International Security* (Vol. 25, No. 1, Winter 2000/01).
  2. Christine Kim and Jane Chung, 'North Korea 2016 Economic Growth at 17-Year High Despite Sanctions', *Reuters Business News*, 21 July 2017.

detested and without friends, and where even the communist leaders of China would dearly like to replace it with a more pliant leadership.

Moreover, North Korea's leaders are well aware of, and make frequent reference to,<sup>3</sup> the fate of the rulers of Iraq and Libya, both of whom were coerced into giving up their nuclear weapon programmes, were then overthrown in US-led invasions in which the UK participated, and subsequently killed with US support. The US would never have attacked Saddam Hussein or Muammar Qadhafi, North Korean statements argue, if they had already acquired a credible nuclear retaliatory capability.<sup>4</sup> North Korea is determined to avoid a similar fate by creating a nuclear deterrent of its own.

In addition to this core deterrent rationale, the regime's propaganda appeals to its people's strong sense of nationalism, using the nuclear programme to demonstrate its willingness to stand up to an aggressive superpower which, in its telling, sought to destroy it in 1950 and failed, and is looking for another opportunity to do so. The regime's commitment to nuclear weapons may also be driven in part by its awareness of its relative weakness in conventional military capabilities, and a desire to limit the resources devoted to the military as a whole, given likely budget challenges.

The regime likely believes that its security and prestige depends on its *possession* of nuclear weapons, not on their use. The US did not want to enter a deterrent relationship with the Soviet Union or China. But it was forced to accept one with each. Similarly, Western states sought to persuade India and Pakistan not to develop their own nuclear capabilities, but they have now accepted their nuclear status as an unfortunate reality. North Korean officials make clear that their objective is to achieve in the future what India has already achieved – acceptance of the country as a nuclear power, on a par in this regard with the eight other states that already have these weapons.

The US and its regional allies are understandably concerned that North Korea could use its nuclear force as a shield behind which it would then be able to pursue a more aggressive policy in other areas, seeking to undermine South Korean confidence in the US alliance and pressing for the withdrawal of US troops.<sup>5</sup> In order to manage such risks, it would be more important than ever for Washington to emphasise the strength of US security guarantees to its allies, including by strengthening forward-based military capabilities. If the perceived credibility of these guarantees were to falter, however, it could trigger a drive for greater strategic autonomy by South Korea and Japan, possibly including the acquisition of their own nuclear weapons.

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3. Mark Gollom, 'Kim Jong-un Views Nuclear Weapons as a Way to Escape Fate of Saddam and Gadhafi', *CBC News*, 13 August 2017; *RT News*, "'H-Bomb of Justice": Pyongyang Brings up Iraq and Libya Doom as Nuclear Deterrence Justification', 9 January 2016.

4. *Ibid.*

5. John K Warden, *North Korea's Nuclear Posture: An Evolving Challenge for U.S. Deterrence*, Proliferation Papers No. 58 (Paris: Institut français des relations internationales, 2017).

The successful acquisition of a strategic nuclear force by North Korea might perhaps be used to bargain for a broader peace settlement with the US and South Korea. With the options of denuclearisation and regime change off the table, North Korea might seek to argue for a relaxation of sanctions from a position of strength, along with a scaling back of military exercises, the opening of diplomatic relations and a peace treaty to formally end the Korean War. In return, the US might demand verifiable assurances that nuclear and missile technologies would not be transferred to others, perhaps along with limits on further increases in the size of the North Korean arsenal. Unlike China and Russia, or indeed Iran, North Korea is not seeking to be a major regional power competing with the US for dominance over its neighbouring states. There is therefore no reason, it might argue, why it could not be left in peace as an independent state. If the West had been prepared to accept India and Pakistan as nuclear-armed states, why not North Korea?

Unfortunately, things are not so simple. The continuing commitment of both Korean states to the goal of reunification would be a strong driver of instability in the event of a future political crisis in the North, and would remain so even if a new peace treaty were signed. International concern over North Korea's repressive human rights record remains, and this would limit prospects for a more fundamental *détente* in wider political relations (as it did in relation to both the Soviet Union and China).

As the evolution of US nuclear relations with Russia and China has demonstrated, moreover, mutual deterrence is a dynamic relationship, in which each side seeks to gain advantage over the other, even as each reluctantly accepts the reality of mutual vulnerability. As in the cases of US–Soviet and US–Chinese political *détente*, a deterrent relationship between the US and North Korea would likely co-exist with continuing investments by both sides in new technologies and capabilities. The US and South Korea would invest in new missile defence and offensive conventional capabilities designed to negate North Korean nuclear advantages. North Korea would seek to expand its capability for an assured second-strike capability that could overcome US missile defences. As a consequence, as is now being seen in India and Pakistan, what would initially be a small North Korean nuclear force could grow steadily over time. Economic and technological factors might constrain the pace of this growth, but by the 2030s North Korea might have a capability for hitting the continental US that is as powerful as the one China has today.

Moreover, even if mutual deterrence appeared to work in times of stability, it is less clear that this would remain the case in the event of a serious internal crisis in North Korea. In such a scenario, potentially involving an exploitation of internal conflicts by China and/or South Korea, nuclear risks could increase as competing factions struggled for advantage. In order to minimise such risks, there would be a strong case for the US and South Korea to work closely with China to support stability within North Korea. In reality, it is by no means clear that such cooperation would be possible.

Moreover, it is far from clear that Trump's leading advisers accept the case for relying on deterrence. Trump's national security advisor, General H R McMaster, said in August that 'classical deterrence theory' does not apply in the case of North Korea because of the nature

of the regime.<sup>6</sup> This was a direct rebuttal of the argument made a few days earlier by Susan Rice – his predecessor in the Obama administration – that the US and its allies could, if need be, ‘tolerate nuclear weapons in North Korea’ and ‘rely on traditional deterrence’.<sup>7</sup> Insofar as McMaster’s analysis accurately reflects official US policy, it may make war more likely.

## The End of Strategic Patience

Faced with the prospect that its major cities might soon become vulnerable to North Korean nuclear attack, the argument for preventive strikes is gaining ground in the US. So far, there has been a strong argument for waiting to see whether some combination of sanctions and diplomacy might delay or halt the North Korean programme before it acquires a credible intercontinental capability. After all, the technical obstacles to this achievement seemed formidable, and an ambitious programme of covert cyber and electronic strikes promised to buy more time.<sup>8</sup> The long-predicted implosion of the regime might have taken place, most likely triggered by an intensification of elite power struggles. It was therefore reasonable to hope that the ‘strategic patience’ approach pursued by the Obama administration and those before it had a reasonable chance of success, negating the case for military action.

Yet this approach has become progressively less credible as North Korea has taken further steps towards building a strategic nuclear force, both against the US and its Asian allies. The successful testing of an ICBM on 4 July may prove to be a decisive moment in this regard. But the US also needs to take account of North Korea’s growing capabilities for retaliatory nuclear strikes against South Korea and Japan. The risks involved in a preventive strike, as a result, are set to rise rapidly, and at an unpredictable pace, over the next few years. Some of Trump’s key advisers may believe, therefore, that it is now or never for the US to take military action.

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6. *ABC News*, ““This Week” Transcript 8-13-17: Lt. Gen. H. R. McMaster, Anthony Scaramucci’, 13 August 2017.

7. Susan Rice, ‘It’s Not Too Late on North Korea’, *New York Times*, 10 August 2017. See also Uri Friedman, ‘Can America Live With a Nuclear North Korea?’, *The Atlantic*, 14 September 2017.

8. David E Sanger and William J Broad, ‘Trump Inherits a Secret Cyber War Against North Korean Missiles’, *New York Times*, 4 March 2017.

## II. What Would War Look Like?

**S**O WHAT MIGHT a conflict look like if it did take place? War is inherently unpredictable. But thinking and preparing can help to broaden planning horizons, assisting leaders to make better-informed decisions before (and during) what would inevitably be a fast-moving and confusing conflict.

### Beginnings

There are a variety of ways in which war could start. North Korea could strike first if it believed that the US were moving towards a surprise attack. This scenario could play out if, as a signal of resolve, the US reinforced its forward military presence, thereby convincing Pyongyang that war had become inevitable and that it should strike first.

Alternatively, a US attack could be triggered by North Korea demonstrating new capabilities, for example through test missiles hitting the ocean near Guam or California, which might precipitate a 'now or never' decision by Trump. The US might then launch a preventive attack against North Korea. This could be limited in scope, targeting certain nuclear- and missile-related facilities, but would more likely take the form of a large-scale offensive.

### The Risks of Mobilisation

In order to enhance the credibility of US threats of preventive military action, and thereby to strengthen its ability to coerce North Korea into making concessions, the US might order a mobilisation of its forces, as if in preparation for a full-scale conflict. Simultaneously, it could also order an evacuation of non-essential personnel (including family members) from US bases, advise US and allied civilians in South Korea to leave, and urge the South Korean and Japanese governments to intensify civil defence preparations.

While a comprehensive mobilisation effort could have substantial value in terms of military preparedness, damage limitation and political coercion, it is hard to see the South Korean government agreeing unless it had already been convinced of the case for preventive military strikes. In the absence of such agreement, a combination of US civilian evacuation and military reinforcements might have some coercive value in relation to North Korea. But, the more convinced that Pyongyang were to become of the risks of war, the more the people of South Korea (and Japan) might come to believe that their own lives were at risk. A credible mobilisation for war could then result in large-scale evacuation of Seoul and other potential targets, growing economic disruption, and a massive political backlash against the US, the combined effect of which would be to undermine the credibility of US military threats. Given these risks, any US prior mobilisation for a preventive war is likely to be kept relatively low-key, even at the cost of foregoing the coercive effect which it could, in principle, achieve.

## Consultation

In order to maximise support from allies, the US would have a strong interest in assigning the blame for starting a war to North Korea or, if this were not possible, in obtaining prior consent from key allies before launching preventive attacks. Yet these diplomatic interests might compete with the operational imperative for destroying North Korea's retaliatory capability as completely and as quickly as possible.

If the US decides to launch a preventive attack, therefore, consultation with allies may be very limited. Given the operational advantages of surprise, a decision to authorise a strike might be known only to a very select group of decision-makers. Key political partners – in Congress and in key allied countries – may have only a few hours' notice of strikes. The leaders of China and Russia may only hear about an attack as it takes place. Even those allies who would be most likely to want to adjust their defence postures in preparation, such as Japan and South Korea, may have limited warning if the US wishes to preserve strict informational security.

If the US were to launch a preventive strike without the agreement of the South Korean government, in order to prevent the emergence of an ICBM threat to its own homeland, it would be seen as signifying a willingness to 'sacrifice Seoul to protect New York'. It is hard to see how the US–South Korea alliance could survive such a trauma, and the US's global reputation as a reliable ally, committed to common security, would be severely damaged. Therefore, even if it is technically possible for Washington to start a war without Seoul's agreement, the political effects of doing so could be devastating for the US's position as a major power in Asia.

## Is a Limited Strike Possible?

In other counterproliferation campaigns, for example against Iraq, Libya and Syria, the US and Israel have used limited strikes against nuclear-related facilities as a means of delaying nascent nuclear programmes. Such an option is also likely to be considered in the case of North Korea. The destruction of a limited number of nuclear- and missile-related facilities could lead to a setback in North Korea's ability to pursue its programmes at the pace of recent years, while also helping to convince the Pyongyang regime that the US was serious about its willingness to deliver on its military threats.

Yet, in such a scenario, North Korea would likely feel that it had no choice other than to retaliate in some way to ensure that it was not simply being seen as capitulating to US demands. Provided that it was reasonably confident that the US strike was a limited one, the regime might not launch an all-out retaliatory response, knowing that this would lead to an all-out conflict and the end of the North Korean state. Instead, in these circumstances, a more likely response would be more limited and proportional, perhaps involving an attack on US military bases with conventional missiles, designed (from its point of view) to restore deterrence. Yet it is hard to believe that the US would at that stage be prepared to stop the escalatory process.

There are many variants of a limited strike option, and many possible North Korean responses. Given North Korea's current, substantial retaliatory capabilities, however, all would carry significant risks for the Western allies. And the less limited the option, the greater the risk that North Korea would assume that it was the beginning of a larger-scale offensive and escalate rapidly in retaliation, calculating that inflicting as much damage as possible at an early stage would be its best hope of persuading South Korea and Japan, and through them the US, to sue for peace.

While North Korea has been planning for a possible US surprise attack for decades, its forces are not maintained at the highest level of readiness because of the economic costs involved in doing so. Yet a limited attack would encourage North Korea to move on to a full war footing, dispersing leaders to secure locations and increasing the readiness of its missile and artillery forces, making it more difficult for follow-on US strikes to succeed.

## A Large-Scale Offensive

Given the risks involved in a limited attack, a US attack is more likely to begin on a large scale, and rapidly build to a comprehensive attack on North Korea's military infrastructure. A US strike would start with air strikes and cyber attacks, perhaps supplemented by special forces operations, with the intention of disabling or destroying as much of North Korea's military infrastructure as possible before a retaliatory response can be mounted. Within days, the US could assemble a formidable strike force, using long-range B-2 bombers based in the US together with carrier-based aircraft and sea-based cruise missiles. North Korea's command-and-control infrastructure would be priority targets in such an attack, along with its nuclear and missile capabilities. The US would also likely target North Korea's large and dispersed offensive conventional and chemical capabilities at an early stage.

Even if it had previously warned against military action and was consulted only after a US decision had been made, the government of South Korea would likely have no choice but to allow its own forces (which are, in any case, assigned to US wartime command under current arrangements) to be deployed as part of an integrated US-led effort. Any hesitation in doing so would increase the extent of damage on its own people and territory. South Korean forces would bring substantial capabilities for attacking time-sensitive North Korean targets with short-range missiles, manned aircraft and special forces.

In response, the North Korean leadership would likely activate longstanding retaliatory plans, in the hope that its best chance for survival would be to inflict massive damage in the first hours of the war, breaking the will of South Korea and the US to continue before they have committed their forces to action. North Korea is estimated to have some 10,000 artillery pieces, as well as 500–600 short-range missiles, in hardened tunnels within range of South Korea. In the event of an attack by the US, it is widely expected that the Korean People's Army would attempt to unleash a massive barrage of artillery shells and Scud missiles on the Seoul area, and on the US and South Korean military bases surrounding it, in order to inflict large-scale casualties and disrupt US and South Korean attempts to mobilise their ground forces. The use of chemical

weapons is likely to be an important element in this counter-offensive, perhaps learning from the experience of the Syrian government's repeated use of these weapons as a weapon of terror during its civil war. According to the South Korean government, North Korea has between 2,500 and 5,000 tons of chemical weapons, including anthrax, smallpox and, possibly, sarin nerve agent.<sup>1</sup> Once it begins to use its artillery systems, the North would be subject to unrelenting counter-barrage attacks, with some estimates suggesting an attrition of around 1% per hour.<sup>2</sup> But its extensive network of underground bunkers would allow it to maintain a credible offensive capability for a significant period of time.

North Korea might also deliberately hold back elements of its arsenal – including some of its nuclear-armed missiles – as part of a threat to 'escalate to de-escalate', with the hope that the risk of nuclear war could persuade its opponents to agree to an early ceasefire.<sup>3</sup> The prospects for such a strategy would depend crucially on whether it was reasonably confident that its nuclear force could be preserved in the face of successive waves of US and South Korean attack. If the regime had limited confidence in the chances of survival for its nuclear force, it would be more likely to use it in the early stages in the hope of capitalising on the shock value.

During this first phase of the war, heavy casualties – both military and civilian – would be expected on both sides. Tens – and perhaps hundreds – of thousands would be killed by the end of the week, and many more wounded and traumatised.<sup>4</sup> Large parts of both North Korea and South Korea would become scenes of carnage, with millions of refugees seeking shelter in areas spared from the initial destruction, and many of these attempting to flee to neighbouring countries.<sup>5</sup> If nuclear weapons were used, the damage could be much greater. A single nuclear weapon used on Seoul could lead to hundreds of thousands of additional fatalities within a week, and many more injured and sick.<sup>6</sup>

## Invasion

Air strikes will not be enough to overcome well-protected underground capabilities (including missile and nuclear facilities), and preparations for a large-scale invasion of North Korea are likely to begin immediately, alongside intensive special forces operations. The 630,000-strong

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1. Dennis P Halpin, 'Armageddon: The Devastating Consequences of a Second Korean War', *National Interest*, 14 April 2017.
  2. Roger Cavazos, 'Mind the Gap Between Rhetoric and Reality', NAPSNet Special Report, 26 June 2012.
  3. Plans to 'escalate to de-escalate' are thought to be an important element in Russian preparations for war with conventionally superior opponents, such as NATO. See, for example, Elbridge Colby, 'Russia's Evolving Nuclear Doctrine and its Implications', *Notes de la Fondation pour la recherche strategique* (No. 1, 12 January 2016).
  4. For example, see Franz Stefan-Gady, 'What Would the Second Korean War Look Like?', *The Diplomat*, 19 April 2017. For a good discussion of the uncertainties involved in such estimates, see Cavazos, 'Mind the Gap Between Rhetoric and Reality'.
  5. For example, see Chetan Peddada, 'A Sneak Peek at America's War Plans for North Korea: The Pentagon Has Been Running War Games for Years, and the Results Aren't Pretty', *Foreign Policy*, 7 September 2017.
  6. *The Economist*, 'How a Nuclear War in Korea Could Start, and How it Might End', 5 August 2017.

South Korean forces possess an impressive array of sophisticated conventional capabilities, many of which could be used as part of a combined offensive against the North. The US would assume that these forces would become available very soon after the war starts, and would help to swing the balance of forces in its direction even before large US-based ground forces could be brought into theatre.

In principle, the US and South Korea could decide to cease fire after they had succeeded in destroying most of the North's visible (above-ground) nuclear and missile capability. In practice, only forces on the ground would give them a high degree of confidence that they had been successful. Moreover, with tens and possibly hundreds of thousands already dead, including many Americans, it would be hard for the US to agree to a political settlement that left the Kim family in charge in the North, able – and no doubt determined – to resume its nuclear programme as rapidly as possible.

For its part, North Korea would look at options to infiltrate its own forces into South Korea to sabotage preparations for invasion and cause maximum disruption. A larger-scale conventional invasion of the South is unlikely, however, since it would expose the North's ground forces to the vastly superior US and South Korean air and ground capabilities. North Korea's lack of capable air forces (and the likely destruction of much of its capability in the first hours of the war) means that a conventional invasion of the South is simply not a viable option.

## Occupation

Given the qualitative gap in capabilities between North Korea and the alliance standing against it, a collapse in the largest formations of its 950,000-strong force is likely within months, if not weeks, of an invasion being launched, giving way to an occupation by South Korean and allied forces. Like other powers facing the might of US conventional power in recent decades, however, North Korea is likely to seek to counter an occupation through other means, exploiting the weaknesses of the US approach to war that have been so clearly demonstrated in Iraq and Afghanistan. An extended campaign of urban warfare, for example, could play to US weaknesses and home-team strengths, undermining the political legitimacy of the occupation and increasing pressure for a political settlement. A wider insurgency campaign against occupying forces and collaborators led by former regime commanders and using the massive network of underground facilities and stores to sustain itself – and working with concealed Korean People's Army units which had survived the initial assault – could mobilise support from significant elements of the population, ensnaring US and South Korean occupying forces in an extended war of attrition.

Preparations would therefore need to be made for the possibility that, with significant US support, large contingents of South Korean troops could be fighting against resistance forces in North Korea for some time. Within the first days and weeks of an invasion, crucial decisions will have to be made on how to maintain order in newly occupied areas. Based on experience in other parts of the world, the sudden disintegration of a state's repressive apparatus is likely to lead to large-scale looting of state property and widespread revenge killings and property seizures. The release of political prisoners from internment camps – now estimated to total

some 120,000 people – might further destabilise local security, as wronged individuals return to their communities to confront their accusers.<sup>7</sup> North Korean elites are known to fear the consequences of reunification for their individual security and wellbeing, and would be likely to resist challenges to their power.<sup>8</sup>

America's recent experience provides salutary lessons for South Korea on how not to conduct an occupation. The Coalition Provisional Authority's decision to dissolve the Iraqi armed forces and Ba'ath Party, taken in May 2003, created a political and security vacuum which was rapidly filled by those seeking to pursue personal and sectarian agendas, followed by an organised insurgency led by ex-Ba'athist military officers. If these mistakes are to be avoided, the South Korean government and military may need to be willing to do more to accommodate the concerns of North Korean elites than the US was in relation to Saddam's allies in 2003. In all probability, this would take place in the context of a rapid political reunification of the two states. Within the broad framework of a commitment to creating a single state, however, a range of transitional arrangements – involving, for example, some degree of federalisation – might be considered in the interests of political stabilisation.

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7. Amnesty International, 'North Korean Prison Camps Very Much in Working Order', 22 November 2016.

8. Bruce W Bennett, *Preparing North Korean Elites for Unification* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2017).

# III. The Shadow of Escalation

## China's Response

**C**HINA'S REACTION TO a US preventive strike on North Korea is hard to predict. The collapse of one of its few allies followed by the advance of US troops towards its own border would risk humiliating its leadership. Moreover, there are an estimated 1 million Chinese citizens living in South Korea, of whom around 100,000 are reported to live in the Seoul area. All would potentially be at risk from North Korean retaliation and the turmoil that would follow.<sup>1</sup>

China is also concerned at the prospect of large numbers of refugees fleeing across its border, creating instability in neighbouring areas of its territory.<sup>2</sup> There are already indications that China is reinforcing its military presence near its border with North Korea in preparation for a possible war.<sup>3</sup> A retired People's Liberation Army general has suggested that China would need to establish refugee camps on its territory in the event of conflict.<sup>4</sup>

Beyond such defensive measures, some form of Chinese military intervention would be quite likely, both to ensure that US (or allied) forces did not reach its own border and to maximise its leverage in shaping the political order that emerges in the wake of occupation. It might, for example, seek to occupy a buffer zone in adjoining areas of North Korea, including the Yongbyon nuclear complex and the Punggye-ri nuclear test site, both of which are within 100 km of the Chinese border.<sup>5</sup> If it were also to use such an intervention to protect the regime, or at least some elements of it, the chances of confrontation with advancing US and South Korean troops would be high.

In order to avoid such an escalation, it would be in the interests of both the US and South Korea to reassure China that they were prepared to take steps to meet its concerns. China might insist on the removal of all US troops from the territory of a newly unified Korea in return for its own cooperation. In the absence of substantial reassurances of this sort, and even if it were not prepared to intervene militarily, China would have many other ways to complicate North Korean stabilisation, for example through economic pressure and political subversion. On the other hand, if the US and China were to agree a longer-term political settlement for post-war

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1. Franz-Stefan Gady, 'Would North Korea Risk the Death of 10,000 Chinese Citizens to Capture Seoul?', *The Diplomat*, 4 May 2017.
  2. Eleanor Albert, 'The China–North Korea Relationship', Council on Foreign Relations, 5 July 2017.
  3. Adam Mount, 'How China Sees North Korea', *The Atlantic*, 29 August 2017.
  4. James Griffiths and Serenitie Wang, 'Is China Reinforcing its Border with North Korea?', *CNN*, updated 26 July 2017.
  5. Frank Aum, 'North Korea and the Need for A US-ROK-PRC Dialogue', US Institute of Peace, August 2017, p. 4.

Korea, endorsed by the UN Security Council, it might go a long way towards improving the wider relationship between the two superpowers. The stakes would therefore be very high indeed.

## Nuclear Consequences

If a new Korean war were to take place, one of its central purposes would be to ensure the denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula, and thereby reduce the global total of nuclear-armed states from nine to eight. Its course and outcome would be followed closely by other states that might be considering the acquisition of a nuclear capability.

Trump has reportedly asked for advice on how to certify that Iran is no longer compliant with the nuclear deal enshrined in UN Security Council Resolution 2231.<sup>6</sup> If the nuclear deal were to break down as a result, and Iran were to revive its efforts to acquire nuclear weapons, past debates on US and Israeli military options in relation to Iran could soon return to the policy debate. It is hard to imagine that the US would want to be involved in major conflicts against significant state adversaries in two regions at once. But concerns over a possible US attack on Iran could increase if Trump had demonstrated his willingness to take action over North Korea.

The consequences for global nuclear regimes would reach even further if nuclear weapons were actually used. There has been some talk that the US would consider the use of its own nuclear weapons in retaliation for a North Korean nuclear attack.<sup>7</sup> However, such a step would be both operationally unnecessary and morally unacceptable. Once their locations are known, the vast majority of militarily relevant targets in North Korea can be destroyed using conventional capabilities. Even where bunkers are located below the depth that conventional munitions can reach, the extent of likely US air superiority is such that alternative conventional means could be deployed to seal such facilities until ground troops can reach them.

Using US nuclear weapons solely as a means of revenge would be even less morally acceptable and would inflict lasting damage on America's international reputation. Inflicting massive suffering on the North Korean people in response to a programme for which they had no responsibility, and without any operational rationale for doing so, would be blatantly contrary to international law on the need for proportionality (in relation to the objectives sought) and discrimination (in relation to non-combatants) in armed conflict. If the president were to order such a step, the defense secretary and all those in the chain of command would be obliged to carry out his order.<sup>8</sup> It is hard to imagine, however, that Trump would be prepared to order such a step.

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6. Gardiner Harris and David E Sanger, 'Trump May Make Congress Decide Future of Iran Nuclear Deal', *New York Times*, 7 September 2017.
  7. Fred Kaplan, 'Don't Panic about North Korea', *Slate*, 5 September 2017; Ralph Peters, 'Here's How to Take out North Korea's Nukes', *New York Post*, 9 August 2017.
  8. For further discussion, see Sarah Grant and Jack Goldsmith, 'What if President Trump Orders Secretary of Defense Mattis to Do Something Deeply Unwise?', *Lawfare*, 22 August 2017. The provisions of the 25<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the US Constitution, which provide for the removal of the president when deemed unfit for office, might be invoked in such circumstances, but would require the agreement of two-thirds of the members of both houses of Congress. See Joel

It would be vital to the cause of global nuclear order that the first use of nuclear weapons since 1945 (in this case, by North Korea) was seen to be entirely counterproductive. In the event of an invasion, the North Korean government could be tempted to use a nuclear weapon against one of its neighbours and then demand political concessions, such as a ceasefire, as the price for not repeating the strike on a larger scale. Yet if, as a result, nuclear weapons were seen as having political utility for a weak state confronting a major power, the consequences for wider nuclear proliferation could be very serious.

## Economic Uncertainties

Despite continuing tensions, the Korean Peninsula – and indeed northeast Asia as a whole – has been at peace since the 1950s. Partly as a consequence, it has become one of the most economically dynamic regions in the world, with two of the world's three largest economies measured by total GDP (China and Japan). The South Korean economy alone was estimated to be 10% larger than Russia's in 2016.<sup>9</sup>

A major war on the Korean Peninsula would have profound consequences for this economic success. First, the short- to medium-term effect on South Korea itself would be substantial. If a war involved attacks on Seoul and other urban centres, production of many goods and services would stop. Global companies, including Korea-based Samsung, have come to rely on South Korean suppliers for key, often hi-tech, components, and would have to incur substantial costs in finding alternative sources. Air and maritime traffic would be disrupted, and perhaps halted, with insurance and shipping costs rising sharply for the region.

While the chances of China getting embroiled in a major conflict with the US appear to be quite low, a war could still have a dampening longer-term effect on its economy, with increased political uncertainty in the wake of a major threat to China's interests in its neighbourhood. Investors would become increasingly wary of over-exposure to the region, postponing decisions or moving capital elsewhere. A new Korean war might also deepen wider US–China tensions, thereby increasing the chances of new economic sanctions, for example in relation to trade or investment. If China were to provide support to a North Korean insurgency, some in the US might call for strategic sanctions (of the sort now being applied to Russia) to be extended to China. The Chinese government also has a range of retaliatory measures which it could consider – for example in relation to the US bond market or US corporate investors in China.

Not least, there would be substantial direct costs as a result of the war and its aftermath. Substantial refugee flows would be likely, especially if a conflict were to be protracted. Post-war unification would lead to massive demands for new investment in the North. It would be in the interests of the wider international community – the US, China, Japan, Europe, the UK, brought together by the UN and international financial institutions – to contribute to making this a success. But the largest share of the financial cost of unification, and most of the

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Goldstein, 'Trump Opponents Have Rediscovered the 25<sup>th</sup> Amendment. Here is What You Should Know about it', *Washington Post*, 7 June 2017.

9. International Monetary Fund, 'World Economic Outlook Database', April 2017.

human energy required, would fall to South Korea, which would also be faced with the costs of repairing the damage to its own territory from the war. There might over time be economic advantages from having access to a large additional workforce, especially given South Korea's rapidly ageing population, but such potential gains, which would in any case be dependent on political stabilisation, would pale compared to the likely costs of reconstruction and investment.

## IV. Preparing a UK Response

**I**F THERE WERE to be a surprise attack on North Korea, the US president would probably telephone 10 Downing Street within an hour of the start of an attack asking for support. Russia and China would demand an immediate UN Security Council meeting. The world's media would be dominated by round-the-clock coverage of the evolving crisis. The UK government would have, at most, only a few hours to make clear how it stood on what would be one of the most momentous strategic shocks of the post-Cold War era. Its decision would have as profound an impact on the UK's international standing, and on its domestic politics, as the fateful decision to stand 'shoulder to shoulder' with the US in the run up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq.<sup>1</sup> But there would be no time for multiple consultations and deliberations before positions had to be taken. The die would be cast on Day One.

In contrast to 2003, it is hard to imagine that the government would be able to achieve a House of Commons vote in support of military action if the US were seen to have started the war. After recent disappointing experiences in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya, the mood of the House of Commons towards supporting US-led military interventions is significantly more sceptical than in the past, as is the wider public mood.

Yet the government would also be aware that the armed forces of the UK's most important ally were now engaged in a major war, more intense than anything that it had experienced for half a century, and likely to involve the deaths of thousands of its military personnel. Although the UK's presence in South Korea is dwarfed by the 150,000 US residents in the country, the government has estimated that there are some 8,000 UK nationals resident and working in the country, along with some 100,000 annual visitors.<sup>2</sup> It would be aware of the importance of the strong security partnerships which the UK now enjoys with Japan and South Korea, and would want to make sure that their views were taken into account in developing UK policy. Whatever their reservations in advance of US military action, it is likely that both countries would have no alternative but to provide strong military and logistical support to their ally once a war had begun. They would look to the UK, Australia and other Western countries to do the same.

So what should the UK do in this scenario? First, it should refuse to rush into unconditional support for US action, it should make it clear that it had not been asked for its views in advance and that it would not have supported military action even if it had been asked. It should pay particular attention to the views of South Korea and Japan, as the regional states likely to be most adversely affected by a war. Second, along with other major European powers, and the EU, it should urge the US to work closely with China to establish a mechanism for negotiating

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1. *The Report of the Iraq Inquiry: Executive Summary*, HC 264 (London: The Stationery Office, 2016), paras 359–89.
  2. Foreign Office, 'Living in South Korea', 31 May 2013, <<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/living-in-south-korea>>, accessed 14 September 2017.

shared post-war objectives. An internal Korean political settlement is unlikely to be sustainable without support from both China and the US, and the wider international community (led by the UN and international aid agencies, with European support) could play a key role in helping to support this process.

A central guiding principle should be that the eventual settlement be designed to ensure that neither the US nor China feels that the other has made substantial strategic gains. The declared purpose of US military action, if it were to take place, would be to ensure the denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula, a long-held objective of the UN Security Council and the broader international community. But China has understandable concerns for its own security if, as a result of the war, the military forces of the US and its allies were to be stationed right up against its own 1,400-km border with Korea. This is not an issue that can be left purely to the sovereign decision of a united Korea to form whichever alliances it chooses. If the stability and peace of northeast Asia is to be restored after a conflict, it will have to be underpinned by recognition of the need for geopolitical balance. Otherwise the unification of Korea could lead to a new Asian Cold War.

# Conclusions

**T**HERE IS NO easy military option that can destroy North Korean nuclear capabilities without starting a wider war. By repeatedly emphasising the massive consequences of preventive strikes against North Korea's nuclear programme, senior Pentagon leaders are therefore sending a clear message to Trump, and to the American people: if you do decide to go ahead with this, do not say we did not warn you. If this war is launched, it will not be surgical or short.

Given these risks, and despite the lack of diplomatic progress and the increasingly harsh rhetoric from his senior officials, it is still hard to believe that Trump will be prepared to start another Korean war. In these circumstances, the most likely scenario over the next decade is that North Korea will acquire a credible capability for targeting the continental US with an increasing number of nuclear weapons. The US would then seek to mitigate this threat, and reassure its own allies and citizens, probably through intensified deployments of missile defences and forward-deployed conventional forces. It may even return US tactical nuclear weapons to South Korea, although such a move would be largely irrelevant to the credibility of its deterrent posture. It would probably seek to maintain and deepen economic sanctions, if only to hold on to some slim possibility that the North Korean regime, or more likely its successor, might agree to dismantle the programme one day. In reality, though, the US–North Korea security relationship would have become one based on permanent mutual vulnerability, at least until the current regime in Pyongyang is replaced.

Yet the Trump administration has so far given little indication that it is prepared to accept such a situation. If it is not, it faces a period of, at most, only two or three years – and perhaps much less, given the rapidity of North Korean technical progress – before it reaches a point at which military action can no longer be taken without unacceptable risk of nuclear retaliation against its own territory. Given this stark choice, there is a real possibility that Trump, with the support of some of his most senior advisers, will decide to resolve the North Korea issue sooner rather than later.



# About the Author

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