

Nuclear North Korea On The Edge

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of nuclear weapons from the Korean Peninsula.

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) recently tested its first intercontinental ballistic missile and its success demonstrated a capability of reaching the U.S. Combined with the possibility that the regime in Pyongyang has miniaturized a nuclear weapon, North Korea may now only be one technical step—mastering reentry vehicle technology—away from being able to credibly threaten the United States with a nuclear weapon.

Consistent with the policies of prior Administrations, Trump Administration officials have stated that the goal toward North Korea is the removal of nuclear weapons from the Korean Peninsula. A military operation to force denuclearization would likely be significantly more complex and dangerous than any of the interventions the U.S. has undertaken since the end of the Cold War, including those in Iraq, Libya, and the Balkans.

Some analysts contend that the risk of allowing President Kim Jong-Un's regime to acquire a nuclear weapon capable of targeting the U.S. is a greater concern than the risks associated with the outbreak of war, especially given Pyongyang's long history of threats and aggressive action toward the U.S. and its long-stated interest in unifying the Korean Peninsula on its terms.

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U.S. Posture

There are 28,500 U.S. troops and their families currently stationed in the Republic of Korea, primarily playing a deterrent role by acting as a tripwire in case of DPRK hostilities south of the DMZ.⁷² U.S. U.S.-ROK Mutual Defense Treaty extended the U.S. deterrent umbrella to South Korea, including nuclear deterrence.

The Kim regime could respond to any kind of U.S./ROK military activity through a variety of conventional and unconventional means, any use of which could escalate into a full-scale war on the Korean Peninsula. Many observers expect the DPRK would employ its conventional artillery toward targets in South Korea and inflict considerable damage upon Seoul.

The DPRK might also employ weapons of mass destruction during a conflict with the U.S.. The conflict with DPRK could escalate into nuclear warfare, the result of which could be radioactive contamination that could affect all states in the immediate region, including China, Japan, and South Korea. As a consequence in this possible contingency, U.S. forces would likely be required to operate in WMD-contaminated zones, and the Korean Peninsula itself could face enormous devastation and loss of life. North Korea also could launch a cyberattack against the United States, South Korea, or other targets. Further, some observers contend that North Korea may already have the capability to launch a nuclear attack against the continental United States, possibly delivered covertly by smuggling, or even through using container ships as a means of delivery.

Even if the DPRK uses only its conventional munitions, some estimates range from between 30,000 and 300,000 dead in the first days of fighting, given that DPRK artillery is thought by some to be capable of firing 10,000 rounds per minute at Seoul. Casualties would likely be significantly higher should nonconventional munitions or capabilities be used. This wide range of casualty estimates is due to the fact that a wide variety of variables (including campaign length, weaponry used, the effectiveness of noncombatant evacuation operations, whether China or Russia might become militarily involved and so on) would likely have significant bearing on the actual numbers of casualties on all sides.

Estimates are that hundreds of thousands of South Koreans would die in the first few hours of combat?from artillery, from rockets, from short range missiles?and if this war would escalate to the nuclear level, then you are looking at tens of millions of casualties and the destruction of the eleventh largest economy in the world.



Pyongyang could also escalate to attacking Japan with ballistic missiles. Japan is densely populated, with heavy concentrations of civilians in cities:

the greater Tokyo area alone has a population of about 38 million. The regime might see such an attack as justified by its historic hostility toward Japan based on Japan's annexation of the Korean Peninsula from 1910 to 1945, or it could launch missiles in an attempt to knock out U.S. military assets stationed on the archipelago. A further planning consideration is that North Korea might also strike U.S. bases in Japan (or South Korea) first, possibly with nuclear weapons, to deter military action by U.S./ROK forces. When discussing the possibility of renewed hostilities on the Korean Peninsula, Secretary of Defense James Mattis stated that although the United States would likely prevail in a military campaign against the DPRK, it "would be probably the worst kind of fighting in most people's lifetimes."

George Washington University professor Amitai Etzioni, writing in August 2016, called for a grand bargain with China over North Korea and references Charles Glaser's (Charles L. Glaser, "A U.S.-China Grand Bargain? The Hard Choice Between Military Competition and Accommodation," *International Security*, Spring 2015, 39:4, pp. 49-90) proposal related to Taiwan. "China has the leverage to compel North Korea to change course, but it has to be incentivized to proceed because the costs to itself from twisting North Korea's arms.... China might agree to help the U.S. in these key matters if the U.S. would allow China to gain an increase in influence in the countries on its border (influence, not military interventions!) and the U.S. stopped its military buildup on China's borders. Or agree to some other such grand bargain.

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Possible Military Options

The design of a military campaign depends on the policy goals that leaders are seeking to accomplish. In August 2017, Secretary of State Tillerson and Secretary of Defense Mattis articulated the U.S. policy objective and parameters for the Korean Peninsula as the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.... [No] interest in regime change or accelerated reunification of Korea. We do not seek an excuse to garrison U.S. troops north of the Demilitarized Zone... [No] desire to inflict harm on the long-suffering North Korean people.¹⁰⁰

If the U.S. objective is the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, U.S. and ROK leaders can seek to achieve this goal in a variety of ways. These range from increasing U.S. presence and posture on the Korean Peninsula, to communicating to Pyongyang?and possibly Beijing?that continuing along the current policy trajectory of nuclearization is counterproductive, or eliminating DPRK?s nuclear and ICBM production capabilities and deployed systems, which would likely require intensive military manpower. The Trump Administration has not publicly detailed how it intends to advance toward the objective of denuclearization or, in particular, how the military might fit into such a campaign.

Maintain the Military Status Quo

Although the majority of the DPRK?s missiles have been launched from fixed sites, efforts are reportedly underway in North Korea to develop solid-fuel mobile missiles that can be deployed more rapidly than liquid-fueled missiles before their launch and are harder to detect than missiles fired from known fixed sites. Reportedly, many DPRK ballistic missile development and production facilities are located in hardened sites in North Korea?s northeastern mountainous regions near the Chinese border, adding an additional element of risk of Chinese intervention if these facilities are attacked.¹¹² The DPRK is also believed to operate a single Sinpo-class diesel-electric submarine that may be able to launch a submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM); this submarine was used to test the DPRK?s KN-11 SLBM.¹¹³ Diesel-electric submarines can be difficult to detect and therefore challenging to target in the event of a limited strike, especially if they are submerged and not moving much, perhaps even for U.S. anti-submarine warfare (ASW) capabilities.



Under this option the United States could attack DPRK nuclear and ICBM facilities through airstrikes and cruise missile attacks. It is also possible that U.S. and ROK Special Operations forces could conduct direct action missions on the ground. These operations are considered to be high-risk?and could incur significant military casualties?compared with attacking targets with aerial assets. Advantages to this course of action may include the disruption of critical components of the DPRK?s ICBM infrastructure, while signaling to Pyongyang that continuing its nuclear program is unacceptable, which could possibly bring the Kim regime back to the negotiating table.

Skeptics could argue that this course of action might escalate, rather than deescalate, the conflict. Further, they could maintain that it might degrade, but not eliminate, North Korea?s ICBM capabilities, perpetuating the crisis and possibly spurring the DPRK to pursue its ICBM and nuclear weapons capabilities even more aggressively and in a manner less conducive to such disruption.

Possible targets in a limited strike scenario include nuclear production infrastructure, nuclear devices and missile warheads, and associated delivery vehicles. Production infrastructure includes reactor complexes, uranium mines and enrichment facilities, plutonium extraction facilities, related research and development facilities, and explosive test facilities.

Proponents might argue that this option is most likely to eliminate the DPRK's nuclear program to the greatest extent without undertaking regime change. Skeptics, however, could argue that a distinct possibility exists that the DPRK would escalate the conflict rather than return to denuclearization negotiations. Given limited intelligence and extensive use of hardened underground facilities by North Korea, some experts believe U.S. strikes would not fully eliminate the country's nuclear weapons program, and "at best, they'll set the program back several years." They could also argue that striking nuclear device/weapon sites or facilities could result in widespread radioactive contamination in the event they are damaged or destroyed. Further, if North Korea's nuclear weapons program cannot be destroyed by U.S. strikes, any residual capability including significant conventional military forces—even if nuclear-capable missiles, submarines, or aircraft are eliminated—could be employed against South Korean and U.S. military and civilian targets, or other allied forces.



Advocates of this argument might maintain that the root of the security challenge on the Korean peninsula is the Kim Jong-un regime itself, and that its elimination has the highest degree of likelihood of promoting regional and global security. Skeptics, however, could argue that eliminating the Kim regime involves a high degree of military and political risk, and that preparations for such a large-scale operation could be easily detected, possibly resulting in preemptive strikes by the DPRK against military and civilian targets.

An additional factor that could affect both sides of the DMZ would be the use of weapons of mass destruction, including chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons. Beyond the costs involved, decontaminating affected areas would likely require significant manpower and medical support. Given the possible spread of WMD contamination in the atmosphere, assistance with cleanup might be required in other countries as well. In addition to performing cleanup operations, which could require significant manpower, U.S. personnel might be directed to help locate and eliminate DPRK WMD stockpiles north of the DMZ.

The aftermath of a full-scale war on the Korean Peninsula could generate significant manpower requirements for U.S. forces. North of the Demilitarized Zone, as many as 25 million North Koreans could be affected by a conflict, which could reduce already-scarce food and other essential supplies available to the general public. Further, approximately 80,000 to 120,000 prisoners in prison camps could be released and may need immediate attention. South of the DMZ, the Republic of Korea could need significant assistance recovering and reconstructing key infrastructure, such as fuel and electricity services, contending with casualties, delivering emergency supplies, and much more.