

Five Factors That Could Lead to War with North Korea

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TENSIONS ON THE Korean Peninsula continue to rise to unprecedented levels. Since taking the helm as North Korea’s leader just under six years ago, Kim Jong-un has intensified the country’s missile and nuclear testing programs, edging the country ever closer to possessing nuclear-tipped ICBMs that are capable of targeting the US mainland. North Korean state media also warned last month that the country might consider firing missiles in waters near Guam if the US–South Korea joint military exercises went on as planned, although it later backed away from that threat. US President Donald Trump has exacerbated the tensions with his tough talk, including his remarks that North Korean threats to the United States “will be met with fire and fury,” mimicking North Korea’s own fiery propaganda. In a show of defiance, North Korea conducted its sixth nuclear test earlier this month, the fourth under Kim Jong-un’s reign. Yet Trump has pointed the finger at China and threatened via Twitter that the United States would stop “all trade with any country doing business with North Korea.”

It is widely understood that war would be a losing proposition for everyone. It would almost certainly be suicide for Kim Jong-un given the overwhelming power of the combined US–ROK forces. It would almost certainly be an extremely deadly affair for

South Korea as well, given the North Korean heavy artillery stationed along the border that is able to target the 25 million people living in the greater Seoul area. Japan would also be in the crosshairs, as would US personnel and facilities in the region and perhaps beyond.

But while common sense might dictate that both the United States and North Korea would seek to avoid war, based on my extensive negotiating experience with both countries during my time at Japan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, it has become apparent to me that each side fundamentally misunderstands the other, so the risk of misperception and miscalculation leading to an accidental military conflict may be higher than many realize.

Five Risk Factors for a US–DPRK Military Conflict

There are five key risk factors that could lead the United States and North Korea toward military conflict. First, North Korea does not appear to understand the essence of US foreign policy and strategic thinking. North Korea’s determination to develop ICBMs capable of delivering a nuclear strike against the United States appears to be motivated by the idea that it will serve as a deterrent against a US invasion. But this is a mistake. As a military superpower,

the United States has shown no tolerance for direct threats made against it. The United States will surely not allow a situation to arise where it can be targeted by a North Korean nuclear strike. In the aftermath of the deadliest attacks against the United States—Pearl Harbor by Japan and 9/11 by al-Qaeda—the United States unleashed massive responses, mobilizing for World War II in the first instance and initiating the invasion of Afghanistan and the Global War on Terror in the second. North Korea must be made to realize that its calculation is flawed. The more success North Korea achieves in developing its ICBMs and miniaturizing nuclear warheads, the greater the probability that the United States will feel compelled to resort to military options.

Second, the United States does not understand the North Korean national mindset. Historically, the Korean Peninsula has been a geopolitical crossroads where great power rivalries have played out. North Korea has always felt pressed on all sides by more powerful nations. The North Korean propaganda machine characterizes the United States as an imperialist power bent on bringing down its government and reminds its citizens daily that the country must be prepared for total war at a moment's notice. Meanwhile, as the sole superpower in the post-Cold War era, the United States is accustomed to influencing the behavior of its allies, friends, and foes alike. However, given North Korea's propensity to feel threatened from all sides, it tends to stubbornly meet pressure and coercion with defiance. This is why, despite all the sanctions, North Korea continues to routinely violate international law—including UN Security Council resolutions—despite overwhelming pressure from the international community.

Third, one of Kim Jong-un's greatest imperatives is his need to project an image of strength to his domestic audience. Kim Jong-un is a young leader with relatively little governing experience; he cannot rely solely on his family name, nor does he have the charisma of his father or grandfather. Therefore, he has been quick to purge any rivals who may threaten his power. This includes his uncle, Jang Song-thaek, whom he had arrested and executed, and his exiled half-brother, Kim Jong-nam, who was murdered in Malaysia. Missiles and nuclear weapons have become tools to demonstrate Kim Jong-un's strength, just as his tough posture in external relations with the United States, China, and Japan helps bolster his domestic political legitimacy. This dynamic further

exacerbates the likelihood of North Korean defiance in the face of external coercion and increases the risk of miscalculation.

Fourth, US President Donald Trump's domestic difficulties and foreign policy are interconnected. Trump is facing an array of problems unlike any other US president in history, including his troubled relationship with Congress and inability to advance his legislative agenda, his adversarial relationship with the media, the chaos and disputes among White House staff, and the allegations of (and investigation into) collusion between his campaign and Russia. This has made it tempting for him to consolidate his base by pursuing tough-talking nationalism as the most visible manifestation of his "America First" foreign policy. The resultant rise in nationalist sentiment has increased the risk of miscalculation on the US side too.

Fifth, the vast differences between the American and North Korean political systems and the absence of normal diplomatic relations between them increases the possibility of miscommunication and misperceptions. North Koreans tend to lack an intricate understanding of the complex checks and balances of US institutions, and so there is a significant risk they will misinterpret US intentions, giving more weight to presidential authority than is merited. This is especially the case given the inconsistency in messaging between Trump's off-the-cuff tweets and ad-libbed remarks on the one hand and the carefully prepared official White House statements on the other. By contrast, North Korea's over-the-top propaganda is coordinated with totalitarian precision. Unless the two countries have established a secret communications channel for frank discussions, the risk that they will misinterpret one another's intentions increases the risk of accidental war.

The Domestic Contexts Affecting Key Regional Actors

The complicated geopolitical situation in the region means that in order to de-escalate tensions it is crucial that all relevant actors—including South Korea, China, and Japan—understand one another's concerns. Doing so requires taking into account the complicated domestic dynamics that exist in these countries.

South Korea

As a liberal, President Moon Jae-in is predisposed to a Sunshine-style policy of engagement with North

Korea. In his campaign rhetoric earlier this year, he proposed policies such as reopening the Kaesong Industrial Zone. However, the current tensions are not conducive to such an approach, and when Moon visited Washington for a summit meeting with President Trump in June, he agreed to maintain cooperation with the United States to pressure the North. South Korea also finds itself caught between the United States and China on the installation of the THAAD missile defense system. As Moon's predecessor, Park Geun-hye, was being impeached, the United States was delivering components for the installation of THAAD in what appeared to be an attempt to make the system's deployment a *fait accompli* before Moon took office. At the same time, China has responded to THAAD with economic coercion, imposing sanctions on a range of South Korean goods and services including K-pop, tourism, batteries, and groceries. South Korea is also concerned that the United States may entertain a bilateral meeting with North Korea, relegating the ROK government to the sidelines of negotiations. Any US-DPRK deal in which the United States agrees to a freeze on North Korea's nuclear and missile development to remove the threat posed to the United States homeland, but fails to alleviate the threat North Korea presents to South Korea, Japan, and others would undermine the credibility of the US alliance system in the region.

China

While China has been maligned for not doing enough to rein in North Korea, it shares the desire of other key actors to avoid having North Korea be recognized as a full-fledged nuclear power. China's most pressing concern is maintaining stability in the lead-up to its 19th Party Congress next month as part of the leadership transition for Xi Jinping's second term in power. North Korea's emerging nuclear status risks undermining China's own privileged position as a nuclear power under the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty, especially if there were to be a domino effect with other East Asian nations seeking nuclear capabilities. As such, we have seen China gradually increase pressure on Pyongyang, including through the latest UN Security Council resolution, which restricts North Korean exports of coal and overseas laborers as well as joint ventures in the country. Over the longer term, China wishes to prevent the collapse of the North Korean state in order to avoid a massive flow of refugees across the

border. It also wants to avoid the possibility of having US troops stationed along its border if the peninsula were to be unified.

Japan

In the wake of North Korea's latest missile test, which overflowed the northern island of Hokkaido, Japan's sense of threat is rapidly increasing. Japanese leaders feel they need to make every effort to avoid a conflict. If war breaks out, it is likely that Japan will be targeted by North Korea—in large part because it hosts so many US military bases—and it is certain that this would cause a high number of Japanese casualties. While the sense of crisis is understandable on its own merits, it also acts as a distraction for Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, whose public approval rating has taken a battering recently. His government was hit by two major scandals and the LDP suffered a decisive loss in the Tokyo Metropolitan elections, which is usually a harbinger of what is to come at the national level. Japan's response to the North Korean situation should be understood in this context as well.

Finding a Common Foundation for a Joint Resolution

Given the five risk factors described above and the complicated domestic politics of each of the major actors in the region, what can be done to mitigate the danger of an accidental war and move toward a negotiated settlement? The North Korean regime's strategy of ensuring its survival by developing its nuclear weapons and missiles hinges on its ability to drive a wedge between the major players. But a coordinated response to its nuclear weapons program would force it to rethink its calculus. At the same time, it is critical that any move to take a tougher line on North Korea be part of a broader strategy geared toward resolving the issue through a negotiated settlement that aims at complete denuclearization. Accordingly, three steps are needed in order to resolve the North Korea situation.

First, China and North Korea must understand that if North Korea continues developing its missiles and nuclear weapons, its game of brinkmanship could prove fatal. Given the American conviction that it must act against direct threats to its national security, if North Korea continues on its current course, there is a high probability that the United States will eventually feel compelled to pursue a military option.

Second, the UN Security Council must pass a new resolution with stringent economic sanctions—including a rigorously enforced oil embargo—in order to demonstrate to North Korea that it will not be able to survive if it continues with its nuclear and missile program.

Third, intensive consultations between the United States, China, South Korea, and Japan are needed in order to establish a common foundation on which a joint approach can be developed to resolve the North Korea threat. That common foundation could begin with the “Four Noes” laid out by US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson in early August—i.e., that the US does not seek a regime change, it does not seek a regime collapse, it does not seek an accelerated reunification of the Korean Peninsula, and it does not seek an excuse to send its military north of the 38th parallel.

Building upon that common foundation, these countries can then work toward a comprehensive

resolution, which is the best path forward to resolve the North Korea situation. The contours for such a resolution have already been delineated in the September 2005 agreement produced in the Six-Party Talks. This entails the denuclearization of North Korea, the establishment of a permanent peace treaty to replace the 1953 Korean War Armistice Agreement, the normalization of North Korea’s diplomatic relations with the United States and Japan, and the promotion of international economic and energy cooperation with North Korea. Without establishing a common understanding, however, it will be increasingly difficult for the United States, China, South Korea, and Japan to coordinate the necessary sticks and carrots to achieve a negotiated settlement. The danger of misperception and miscalculation leading to a devastating war in Northeast Asia seems to rise with each passing day. In order to forestall such an event, we must act quickly and decisively to reach a comprehensive negotiated settlement with North Korea.