Take Preventive War With North Korea Off the Table

The Risks of Trump's Tough Talk

By John Delury, FOREIGN AFFAIRS, August 22, 2017

The biggest change that U.S. President Donald Trump has brought to North Korea policy is rhetorical—but the strategic implications may be huge. In terms of actual policy, the Trump administration’s “strategic accountability” owes more to the Barack Obama administration’s “strategic patience” than either its architects or its critics might like to admit. The central thrust of the policy is to cajole Beijing into putting greater pressure on Pyongyang, as was attempted in the latest round of UN Security Council sanctions and in numerous presidential tweets. Indeed, rather than breaking with the past, Trump seems to have inherited a misconception that China is the key to solving the North Korea problem.

Despite the underlying policy continuity, however, there has been a major shift in the way this administration talks about North Korea. The president coyly alludes to pre-emptive strikes, and his senior advisors explicitly bring up “preventive war.” These ideas have featured frequently in the media and have become normalized in public discussion. The so-called military option, a fringe position a year ago, is now part of the mainstream debate.

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This is something new, and it’s worth a quick review of the North Korea conundrum since the end of the Cold War to see why. The only other time there has been war talk of this kind was in the spring of 1994. Back then, with Pyongyang on the brink of a nuclear breakout, U.S. Secretary of Defense William Perry was ready to present President Bill Clinton with a strike plan to destroy the Yongbyon nuclear site. The crisis, which bubbled over for a year, was deflated by a fit of diplomacy that led to the U.S.-DPRK Agreed Framework, which froze North Korea’s plutonium program and later enabled a moratorium on missile tests. Talk of strikes disappeared.

The Agreed Framework unraveled during the Bush administration, however, and when Pyongyang was preparing to test a long-range ballistic missile in June 2006, Perry and Ashton Carter, the future defense secretary, wrote an op-ed advocating a strike on the missile as it sat on the launch pad. But the Perry-Carter proposal was an outlier, the exception that proved the rule of zero interest in military options on the Korean Peninsula. Iraq was bad enough. Bush let the launch happen and later in the year redoubled efforts at multilateral diplomacy via the Six Party Talks.

Carlos Barria / REUTERS  South Korean President Moon Jae-in, U.S. President Donald Trump, and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in Hamburg, Germany, July 2017.
Those talks were coming apart by the time Obama took office, however, and his administration focused on sanctions and pressure (via China) rather than a return to dialogue and negotiation. Like Bush and Clinton before him, Obama rejected war as a viable solution. Although “we could destroy North Korea, obviously, with our arsenal,” Obama told Charlie Rose in 2016, war would come with unacceptable “humanitarian costs” and would jeopardize “our vital ally,” the South Koreans, who “live right next door.”

So why is the prospect of a Second Korean War being normalized to the American public? Is this all Trump’s fault? Trump’s language of “fire and fury,” along with less colorful but equally ominous statements by administration officials, is feeding off of shifting perceptions of the threat that North Korea poses to the United States, both in terms of capabilities and intentions. The administration’s frequent references to military options, magnified by relentless media coverage, stir up public anxiety and openness to war as a solution. Trump will never change his language game. But the public can and should reflect on the true nature of the threat, whether it presents a clear and present danger to Americans, and most important, whether it merits all the talk of war as a viable solution.

The improvement in North Korea’s weapons capabilities is incontrovertible. The country has made clear advances in building a nuclear-tipped ICBM that could strike an American city. Jeffrey Lewis at the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies argues that North Korea has already crossed the finish line. Although the country can always continue to perfect and enhance second-strike nuclear deterrence capability, it essentially already poses a direct threat to the U.S. homeland. Experts have been watching this process unfold for years and are not terribly surprised that this is where we’ve ended up. But folks living in Denver could be forgiven for feeling like they are very suddenly living under the shadow of a mushroom cloud of North Korean provenance.

Of course, capability in and of itself is neither a threat nor a reassurance. Everything depends on the capability’s relationship to its owner—Russia or China could launch nuclear attacks on Denver, but no one gives that possibility much thought. And this is where our perceptions of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and his intentions come into play.

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There is a widespread notion that Kim is nuts, which is encouraged at least in part by comments made by the Trump administration. According to the leaked transcript of a phone call with Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte, Trump asked if Kim was “stable or not stable” and referred to him as a “madman with nuclear weapons.” United Nations Ambassador Nikki Haley put it even more bluntly when she said that “this is not a rational person.” These comments feed into the public imagination, which already sees Kim’s father as an evil madman and transfers the reputation naturally onto the son. War becomes rational if Kim is not, since he might do something crazy, even suicidal, like start a thermonuclear war with the United States.

Kim’s father, Kim Jong Il, in contrast to the popular image, proved to be well-informed and eminently rational, in the estimation of world leaders who actually dealt with him, such as Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, South Korean President Kim Dae-jung, and Japanese
Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi. As to Kim Jong Un, only a handful of outsiders have spent time with him. But there is no evidence that his rational faculties are impaired, and very few North Korea experts question his mental stability. The intelligence community would seem to agree; CIA Director Mike Pompeo recently stated that he considers Kim a rational actor who “responds to adverse circumstances.” Public perceptions of this adversary are thus out of sync with expert assessment inside government and out.

Like the CIA director, Trump’s top national security advisors appear to accept the premise of Kim’s rationality. For them, the real question seems to be less about his sanity than the implications of his perceived cruelty. National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster brings up the assassination of Kim’s half-brother in Malaysia as evidence that the United States is dealing with a leader whose brutality makes him unpredictable and “very, very dangerous.” Recently, McMaster went further, arguing that “classical deterrence theory” of the kind that prevented war with the Soviet Union does not apply to “a regime that imprisons and murders anyone who seems to oppose that regime,” including members of [the leader’s] own family, using sarin nerve gas in a public airport.” McMaster comes across in news reports as the leading advocate within the administration of military options on the Korean Peninsula.

KCNA / VIA REUTERS Kim Jong Un in an undated photo released by North Korea’s Korean Central News Agency.

The notion that Kim’s brutality puts him in a class by himself and presents a unique threat to the United States, one meriting consideration of preventive war, seems flawed. The United States has, after all, deterred brutal, nuclear-armed dictators before, including Stalin and Mao. It has also enjoyed close military alliances with brutal dictators, including in South Korea. It is true that Kim’s brutality could enable him to accept extraordinary suffering by his people in order to ensure the security of his regime and the survival of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea. Indeed, the country’s capacity to absorb pain is a major reason why sanctions have been so ineffective in stopping its pursuit of nuclear weapons. But Kim’s brutality, as evidenced by his sacrificing family members to political imperatives and his people’s welfare to security interests, does not render him unpredictable. Nor does it mean Kim cannot be lured in with a diplomatic initiative to improve relations. Brutality is not the same as nihilistic recklessness, which is what it would take for Kim to strike first at the United States.

The American public seems too eager to underestimate North Korea’s military capabilities and overestimate Kim’s propensity to use them. A preventive war would not only be “tragic on an unbelievable scale,” as U.S. Secretary of Defense James Mattis pointed out, it would be incredibly stupid, since it is unnecessary and avoidable. Together with South Korea, the United States can live with and deter a nuclear North Korea as long as necessary. Washington can also engage Pyongyang far more intensively than it has for the last eight years. Using direct negotiation and economic engagement, in close coordination with Seoul, it stands a good chance of deflecting Pyongyang’s current trajectory, or at a minimum, capping the capabilities where they are and rendering them less threatening by reducing hostilities.

Meanwhile, it would be wise for the Trump administration to liberate itself from the shackles of “strategic patience” and craft a new plan that ignores Beijing rather than waits on it, one that
probes for what Kim would do in return for lifting sanctions, rather than what he will stop doing out of fear of an embargo. Kim has shown from the moment he assumed power that he is not interested in close ties with Chinese leader Xi Jinping, a fact that limits Beijing’s leverage (and increases Washington’s). China can use the blunt instrument of inflicting economic pain by reducing trade and investment, but they cannot act as the guarantor or even a broker of a deal. Trump’s strategy should be to deal directly with Pyongyang while coordinating closely with Seoul (and Tokyo).

Regardless of the administration’s policy direction, the American public would do well to reflect critically on the upsurge in war talk. The United States has stumbled into war before and regretted it terribly afterwards. Kim is not crazy, nor does his brutality necessitate a preventive war. Incessant talk of war only serves to reinforce North Korea’s worst narrative about America’s implacable hostility. Much worse, the callous disregard of South Korean and Japanese lives implied by comments like Senator Lindsey Graham’s about the need to fight the war now while the people who die are “over there,” can do lasting damage to the U.S.-South Korean alliance and to American credibility with its allies and partners across Asia, who are all watching the policy but also listening to the language.

Already, South Korean President Moon Jae-in has felt it necessary to publicly reassure his people that the United States would not take unilateral military action on the Peninsula without his approval and that he simply would not allow a second Korean War to take place. Words matter. Americans need to find a way to debate the complexities of dealing with the threat presented by Kim’s North Korea in a language that advances the security and interests of the United States, its allies, and its friends in the region. And that conversation should be based on a sober assessment of what the danger really is.