

North Korea Fears 'Regime Change' Strike

Exclusive: Tensions keep rising on the Korean peninsula with North Korea test-firing missiles and the U.S. dispatching a naval task force, but no sign of President Trump's proposed negotiations, writes Jonathan Marshall.

By Jonathan Marshall

Japanese citizens had every reason to be flustered on Monday when North Korea fired four missiles into the Sea of Japan as a show of strength. But they – and every American who cares about the risk of getting dragged into a nuclear war to defend Japan and South Korea – need to think harder about how to end the cycle of military provocations that are escalating in the region to a potentially deadly end.

Declaring that he stands “100 percent” behind Japan, President Trump blasted North Korea's demonstration as “a clear challenge to the region and the international community,” and a “new phase” of Pyongyang's threat to America's allies. His ambassador to the United Nations, Nikki Haley, declared that the world “won't allow” North Korea to continue following its “destructive path.”

Meanwhile, the head of the U.S. Pacific Command announced that “continued provocative actions” by North Korea, including its missile launches, confirmed the wisdom of Washington's decision to begin this week deploying a long-awaited missile defense system to South Korea.

Instead of contributing to regional peace, however, that deployment decision only inflamed regional tensions with two major powers that share Washington's dismay over North Korea's nuclear and missile programs. Furious China officials immediately threatened unspecified countermeasures, and Russian officials condemned the deployment as well, noting that it could be expanded to neutralize their own military capabilities.

Provoking Pyongyang

Mentioned only in passing – if at all – in most news stories was the context for the latest of Pyongyang's seemingly random acts of aggressive militarism.

Korea experts had in fact long predicted that the North would – as it does every year – undertake “military provocations” to protest the start of the latest annual U.S.-South Korean military exercises on March 1. The same day those exercises began, the *Wall Street Journal* reported ominously that “an internal White House review of strategy on North Korea includes the possibility of military force or regime change to blunt the country's nuclear-weapons threat.”

A North Korean diplomat condemned the latest joint exercises as “massive” and “unprecedented in size,” saying, “It will certainly jeopardize peace and stability in the region and drive the situation in the Korean peninsula to the brink of nuclear war.”

His rhetoric had more than a little factual basis. South Korea’s defense minister confirmed that the exercises are similar in scale to those held last year. With more than 300,000 South Korea and 17,000 American troops, 2016’s war games were the largest in the region’s history.

Although officials in Washington and Seoul invariably characterize the maneuvers and simulations as “defensive” and “non-provocative,” last year’s exercises reportedly included “rehearsals of surgical strikes on North Korea’s main nuclear and missile facilities and ‘decapitation raids’ by special forces targeting the North’s leadership.”

Taking part in the exercises was a naval strike group led by the nuclear-powered supercarrier USS *John C. Stennis*, along with the nuclear-powered attack submarine USS *North Carolina*, stealth F-22 fighter aircraft, nuclear-capable B-52 and B-2 bombers, and Marine special forces who practiced amphibious landings.

Those forces represent exactly the capabilities that informed military analysts say would be used if Washington decided to unleash a preemptive, surprise “surgical strike” against North Korea’s nuclear forces and command and control centers.

Dangerous Precedents

Viewing that array of forces in the light of past “U.S. attacks on Libya and Iraq and Serbia,” leaders in Pyongyang last year understandably saw “the potential for a U.S. attack,” remarked Bruce Klingler, a Korea analyst for the conservative Heritage Foundation, at the time.

“They know the history of the Marine Corps,” he added, “so they would see a large presence of Marines on the peninsula as possibly a prelude to an attack or an invasion – especially when it’s coupled with the presence of B-52s and nuke-capable submarines.”

On both sides of the 39th parallel, opponents are operating by the same familiar logic – summed up by one Marine Corps general as “peace through strength.” Ignoring military threats is certainly not an option. But responding to them only with military force leads to a dangerously *illogical* cycle of escalation, bluffs, threats, and counter-escalation.

We should take seriously the warning of North Korea's ambassador to the U.N. that "the situation on the Korean Peninsula is again inching to the brink of a nuclear war." That risk makes it more imperative than ever that Washington and its allies stop threatening "regime change" and start exploring negotiations, and even a meeting of leaders, to end the state of war between the two Koreas that has lasted ever since the armistice in 1953.

Before it's too late, indeed, someone should remind President Trump of his professed willingness to talk to Kim Jong Un over a hamburger in the cause of peace. "I'll speak to anybody," he told a campaign rally last June. "Who knows? There's a 10 percent or a 20 percent chance that I can talk him out of those damn nukes because who the hell wants him to have nukes?"

Jonathan Marshall previously authored "Behind the North Korean Nuke Crisis" and "The Negotiation Option With North Korea."
