

# No Time for Complacency over Korea War Threat

Exclusive: Although the North Korea crisis has largely faded from the headlines, the chances of war breaking out are still unacceptably high – requiring greater attention from both the peace movement and Congress, notes Jonathan Marshall.

By Jonathan Marshall

Like the proverbial calm before the storm, war scares on the Korean peninsula have temporarily gone quiet while its two governments make nice over the 2018 Winter Olympics. But when the games end, count on the Trump administration reviving its ultimatum to North Korea: Stop all nuclear and missile testing and begin to denuclearize, or face a devastating, preemptive attack.

Given the sheer number of leaks from the Trump White House, we would almost certainly know by now if the President were simply bluffing about his intent to pursue a “military option”—otherwise known as war—to stop North Korea’s nuclear program. Instead, we’ve heard nothing but confirmation from his senior advisers, within and without the administration, about Trump’s commitment to use deadly force if Pyongyang does not yield.

Millions may die if the White House launches such a war. Given the huge stakes, Americans should be protesting in the streets, and members of Congress should be threatening to shut down the government, until the administration commits to peaceful resolution of the Korea issue. Instead, like anesthetized animals awaiting slaughter, most of us seem to be passively accepting our fate.

The U.S. military is certainly preparing to carry out a presidential order for war. Besides undertaking a host of war games with South Korea over the past year, it has moved long-range B-52, B-1, and “stealth” B-2 bombers to Guam, from which they can strike North Korea with nuclear or conventional bombs. The Defense Department has also been testing the world’s most powerful non-nuclear bomb, the 30,000-pound GBU-57, which has the capacity to plow through hundreds of feet of earth to destroy “hardened” weapons silos.

As George W. Bush did in the run-up to his invasion of Iraq, Trump has also been building a public case for bringing “fire and fury” to North Korea, most recently in his State of the Union Address.

Echoing Bush’s rhetoric about not waiting for a “mushroom cloud,” Trump warned that “North Korea’s reckless pursuit of nuclear missiles could very soon threaten our homeland.” Without mentioning the power of America’s vast nuclear

deterrent to keep us safe, he again echoed Bush's rhetoric about Saddam's regime: "We need only look at the depraved character of the North Korean regime to understand the nature of the nuclear threat it could pose to America and to our allies."

Staying on message to prevent the Olympics from diminishing Americans' fear and loathing of Pyongyang, Trump is sending Vice President Pence to the games with the father of Otto Warmbier, an American college student who died after being imprisoned in North Korea.

### **The Cost of 'Preventive' War**

Another recent signal of the White House's intent was its decision to rescind its planned nomination of Victor Cha, a Georgetown University scholar who served in the George W. Bush administration, to be ambassador to South Korea. That position remains embarrassingly vacant more than a year into the Trump presidency.

Despite Cha's hardline stance against North Korea's nuclear program, he raised questions within the administration about the wisdom of a preventive military strike. Even a small attack, meant to give North Korea a "bloody nose" without escalating to all-out war, "would likely kill tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of Americans," he wrote in an op-ed column published after his nomination was dropped.

Cha added that even a large-scale attack "would only delay North Korea's missile-building and nuclear programs, which are buried in deep, unknown places impenetrable to bunker-busting bombs. A strike also would not stem the threat of proliferation but rather exacerbate it, [creating] a vengeful effort intended to equip other bad actors against us."

Meanwhile, a third of a million Americans resident in South Korea and Japan—not to mention millions of Koreans and Japanese—would be vulnerable to North Korean counterattack by artillery, missiles, and biochemical weapons, not to mention any remaining nukes.

"To be clear," Cha wrote, "the president would be putting at risk an American population the size of a medium-size U.S. city—Pittsburgh, say, or Cincinnati."

Cha's casualty estimates aren't seriously in question. Even Defense Secretary James Mattis said last summer that a war with North Korea would be "catastrophic."

What's more significant is the fact that, having spoken in confidence with all the relevant administration insiders, Cha evidently believes they remain

committed to the option of preventive war. Trump has long vowed that he will never permit North Korea to develop nuclear missiles capable of reaching the United States—a feat that U.S. intelligence analysts say may be only months away.

The greatest immediate threat to U.S. national security, however, is not North Korean missiles per se, but the fact that the Trump White House faces so little push-back from outside the administration to its fast-approaching “military option.”

Indeed, the president’s golfing partner and foreign policy adviser Sen. Lindsey Graham, the South Carolina Republican, has been whispering in his ear for nearly a year about the pressing need to wipe out North Korea’s nuclear forces before they can reach the United States.

And just last week, former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger told a hearing of the Senate Armed Services Committee that the temptation to launch a preemptive attack on North Korea is “strong and the argument rational.”

No wonder, then, the respected International Crisis Group warned recently that “The threat of nightmarish war on the Korean peninsula is higher than at any time in recent history.” A national poll released in mid-January found 71 percent Americans surveyed were concerned about war breaking out with North Korea.

### **Where is the Peace Movement—and Congress?**

Yet the public has been strangely quiescent. Besides a handful of demonstrations around the country, the peace movement, such as it is, has been largely AWOL on the issue. Current campaigns of antiwar groups focus on “divestment from the war machine” and protests against the U.S. base in Guantanamo, but few have Korea as their focus.

The grassroots organization Peace Action is, however, helping to organize individual and group support for an “Olympic Truce” to promote a nonviolent settlement of issues on the Korean peninsula.

“The peace movement somewhat mirrors the public in concern regarding tensions with North Korea, but not being clear on what to do about it,” Peace Action’s President Kevin Martin told me. “That is beginning to change with our campaign around the Olympic Truce, which 128 organizations, including many Korean-American groups, have now endorsed.”

A few members of Congress have spoken out strongly about the need to “avoid a costly and catastrophic war on the Korean Peninsula,” as Virginia Sen. Tim Kaine

put it recently. Two bills introduced in Congress, H.R. 4837 and S. 2016, call for “no unconstitutional strike against North Korea” without explicit authorization from Congress. But they have little Republican support and no immediate chance of passage.

In a letter sent to President Trump on Monday, 18 Democratic senators said they are “deeply concerned about the potential consequences of a preemptive military strike on North Korea and the risks of miscalculation and retaliation.”

But even they seem to accept the administration’s framing of the issue. Warning that “it would be extremely irresponsible to instigate military conflict *prior to exhausting every diplomatic option*” (my emphasis), they ignore the success the United States has had deterring every other hostile nuclear power, including Stalin’s USSR and Mao’s China. CIA intelligence analysts have concluded that Kim Jong-un’s regime is both rational and deterrable, meaning that there is no cause for preemptive war, whatever the outcome of diplomacy.

Time is fast running out for Americans and their representatives in Congress to wake up and put handcuffs on the Trump administration before it triggers mass murder in North Asia, and possibly much closer to home. It will take an Olympic-sized campaign, but the stakes could not be higher.

**Jonathan Marshall is author or co-author of five books on international relations and history. His articles on Korea include “America Isn’t on the Brink of Nuclear War–It Just Looks That Way,” “What’s Wrong with Talking to North Korea?” “Trump’s North Korea Delusions,” “The New Trump: War President,” “Hurtling Toward Fire and Fury,” “Risk to US from War on North Korea,” “North Korea Fears ‘Regime Change’ Strike,” “The Negotiation Option With North Korea,” and “Behind the North Korean Nuke Crisis.”**

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