



War on the Korean peninsula: brinkmanship or a genuine possibility?

With Washington and Pyongyang trading threats, experts assess likelihood of kinetic action

Chad O'Carroll

October 23rd, 2017

Share
194

Comments
1

Talk of military conflict on the Korean peninsula has been rising sharply in recent weeks, with

several observers warning that the risk of war is currently at its highest ever point since the Korean War.

But unlike in the past, when Pyongyang's actions have been the primary driver of fears, much of the increased anxiety seems to now be driven by the actions and warnings of the United States.

From an official perspective, U.S. President Trump threatened to “totally destroy (https://www.nknews.org/2017/09/trump-threatens-total-destruction-of-north-korea-during-un-speech/)” North Korea in September, leading to an unprecedented and personalized response (https://www.nknews.org/2017/09/kim-jong-un-says-u-s-will-pay-dearly-for-threats-to-destroy-n-korea/) from Kim Jong Un.

Last Thursday (https://t.co/Ei0c4kdEXC), U.S. national security advisor H.R. McMaster warned that a nuclear North Korea would be “unacceptable,” suggesting – in principle – that Washington will not be able to tolerate Pyongyang deploying a credible intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) system.

While there might normally be question marks about the credibility of such remarks, a bulletin sent by the Nelson Report on Friday – a beltway-produced Asia-focused news and views service – alarmingly said: “senior Administration officials, speaking privately or on background, warn to take so seriously the possibility of a US pre-emptive strike or kinetic action against N. Korea's growing nuclear missile threat that removing one's personal assets from S. Korea is now advisable.”

Though conceding “psywar” efforts could partially explain such chatter, Nelson added: “We've never heard this kind of private warning from USG folks before...if anything, it's always been “calm down”. So why the clear “escalation” now? Gamesmanship, or fair warning?”

Given the context, it's not hard to see why annual “Courageous Channel (http://www.usfk.mil/Media/News/Article/1343185/usfk-to-conduct-annual-courageous-channel-exercise-courageous-channel/)” evacuation exercises being conducted by United States Forces Korea (USFK) this week are attracting extra attention, especially given the increasingly frequent B-1B Lancer bomber and aircraft carrier drills scheduled for later this month.

“The risk of military conflict is greater today than it has ever been in my memory”

All said, then, what do former United States government officials and international North Korea specialists think about the current situation?



(https://www.nknews.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/5440384453_4669d0096b_b.jpg)

The increased anxiety seems to now be driven by the actions and warnings of the United States | Photo: Gage Skidmore

WAR SOON?

Of the eight contacted by NK News, five specialists said that the current situation resembled an unprecedented or significant level of risk surrounding the peninsula.

"The risk of military conflict is greater today than it has ever been in my memory," said Evans Revere, a career Asia expert with decades of experience in the U.S. State Department.

"My major concern is the possibility of a conflict initiated by accident or by one side's miscalculation or misperception of the other side's intentions," he said, describing how "U.S. and North Korean leaders are now engaged in personal attacks, making this a high-stakes game of 'face' between the two, and making it difficult for either one to back down."

Dr. Andrei Lankov, a director at Korea Risk Group (<http://www.korearisk.com>) – the parent company of NK News – said his discussions with a former high-level official in Washington DC last week put the "the probability of kinetic action undertaken by the United States currently between 20 and 30 percent, and the probability of such actions resulting in a full-scale escalation as probably half of this amount."

Another former Asia hand at the U.S. State Department, speaking on condition of anonymity due to the sensitivity of the situation, described the current state of affairs as a "period of greatly increased uncertainty," citing "Kim Jong Un's personality, and the unprecedented situation of North Korea threatening the U.S. homeland with nuclear attack."

Given the White House's insistence that it will not allow Pyongyang to be capable of threatening

the U.S. with nuclear attack, the former official said it's no surprise that rumors are emerging about Washington's increasing consideration of military options, though many express a belief that it still appears unlikely a war will occur.

But senior lecturer at the Victoria University of Wellington Van Jackson said that while the risk of war remains low, it is "much higher than any time I can remember."

"The problem is that there are a lot of risks—of miscalculation, of overconfidence in an aggressive approach, of pressures on Kim Jong Un to launch a first strike," he said. "These risks need to be managed, but the words and deeds of the Trump administration just keep exacerbating them."

And LTG Chun In-bum, a recently retired three-star lieutenant general from the South Korean army, said he considered "the present situation to be critical because of the increasing escalation of tension that has come to formulation in and around the Korea peninsula."

"I still see U.S. action as mostly aimed at pressuring China to do more"

OR MAYBE NOT?

Not all, however, agreed that things were necessarily as bad as is being viewed in some quarters.

"The risk of miscalculation leading to military conflict is higher now than recently, but certainly not at its highest, and certainly not unavoidable," said Kevin Shepard, Ph.D., a U.S. based policy consultant. "There are advocates for preventive strikes, but growing diplomatic and economic isolation (expulsion of ambassadors, termination of labor contracts, cutting trade ties) empowers DC's advocates for non-kinetic means."

And, notably, he also questioned the strategic value of "limited" military options increasingly discussed by some observers: shoot-down attempts of North Korean missiles or the U.S. using force to prevent missiles ever leaving their launch positions.



(https://www.nknews.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/hwasong12_11-1.jpg)

North Korea's rapidly developing missile program has escalated fears of an American intervention | Photo:
Rodong Sinmun

"Military actions short of war could not remove North Korean nuclear and missile capabilities, and should only be considered (everything should be considered) for value in coercing North Korea into abandoning its provocative behavior."

For his part, Ralph Cossa, president of the Pacific Forum CSIS in Hawaii, said: "I think the odds of preemptive military action or a U.S.-initiated preventive war remains low."

"I still see U.S. action as mostly aimed at pressuring China to do more."

Christopher Green, a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Leiden, said he concurs with the view that conflict is unlikely.

"This is based on the tremendous difficulty the U.S. would face in attempting unilateral action given fairly implacable opposition from allies and opponents in the region and in the UN – and of course at home, where memories of past military adventurism are still fresh – plus the relative optimism of current U.S. and allied officials that a diplomatic route can be found."

And on the prospects of the U.S. attempting to shoot-down any subsequent North Korean ICBM test, Cossa said: "(it) may be possible but this would hardly precipitate all-out conflict."

Still, Shepard said that current evaluations of U.S. capabilities to "credibly and successfully conduct a limited strike and message its intent in a manner that would prevent escalation would lead policy advisors to shy away from this option."

In other words: the U.S. lacks a reliable means to convince North Korea that any limited military

action isn't just the start of a second Korean war.

LACK OF OFF-RAMPS?

Despite what Korea specialists think about the prospects for military conflict in the current situation, an absence of credible "off-ramps" to reduce mounting pressure between the U.S. and North Korea could, depending on future circumstances, make conflict unavoidable.

That's something that is increasingly concerning to some North Korea watchers, especially given how rigid Washington's policy currently appears to be.

"Right now the U.S. government is ostensibly, judging by outward appearance, trying to exercise so-called 'maximum pressure' on North Korea, most likely hoping that it would prevent Pyongyang from completing its ICBM program to the point it will be capable of hitting the entire territorial United States," said Lankov.

Lankov said he, therefore, doesn't see why Washington would want to "compromise on this policy of brinkmanship" – for example, by engaging in high-level talks.

Evans Revere, the former Asia specialist at the U.S. State Department said: "the U.S. (nevertheless) has channels of communication to the DPRK that can and should be used to issue warnings, clarify intentions, provide reassurances, and explore flexibility."

The value of such channels, however, depends on what might be communicated through them.

The U.S. lacks a reliable means to convince North Korea that any limited military action isn't just the start of a second Korean war

"Unique in the current situation is that strategists have to consider face-saving options for both parties," said Shepard, the policy consultant. "The Trump administration style provides pragmatic opportunities not always available in the past, but moves such as striking Syria and decertifying the nuclear deal with Iran feed North Korean distrust of Washington."



"From the North Korean perspective a freeze will not achieve anything" | Photo (<http://wpinject.com/>) by nknews_hq (<http://www.flickr.com/photos/153583264@N02/33356421184>)

While release valves to mounting pressure were suggested by others, there is uncertainty about how likely either North Korea or the United States would be likely to pursue them.

"Other than diplomacy, the only reasonable de-escalatory measure I can foresee is suspending deployments of bombers to the peninsula," said Van Jackson, the Victoria University of Wellington lecturer.

But given U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley's description of a Chinese proposal for a freeze on North Korea's WMD programs in exchange for a suspension of military drills as "insulting (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/sep/04/north-korea-nikki-haley-sanctions-nuclear-test-begging-for-war>)," it's not clear such a proposal would gain much traction with Washington at present.

And on that note, Green said: "Timing is everything: Freeze-for-freeze won't work, for example."

"The next major round of U.S.-ROK military exercises aren't until spring, so from the North Korean perspective a freeze will not achieve anything," he said. "We need to find a credible quid pro quo to kickstart discussion."

The former U.S. official who requested anonymity said Kim Jong Un deciding to stop nuclear and long-range missile testing could provide another off-ramp, or for him to indicate a serious interest in negotiating seriously about denuclearization.

"(And) for his part, Trump could redefine his redline as a broad red zone," the former official said. "In any event, he could continue indefinitely on the current path without initiating conflict by enhancing deterrence and containment of North Korea."

But in the event that the current path leads to the emergence of a credible North Korean ICBM that can threaten Washington, what would happen next?

"I believe once the North is convinced that we are convinced they can hit mainland U.S. (i.e., after an extended range missile test), Pyongyang will likely agree to talks to discuss a testing freeze in return for a lifting of sanctions," said Cossa, the President of Pacific Forum.

"I think that's a bad deal, but can't predict how Washington would react – Seoul and especially Beijing would likely support such a deal, in my view," Cossa said.

"Timing is everything"

DETERRENCE WORKS

An emerging consensus in parts of the U.S. administration that may be fueling apparent appetite for military conflict is the idea that Kim Jong Un is either irrational, unpredictable or impossible to deter.

These remarks by the likes of Trump and McMaster both support this interpretation, as even do some historical comments by the likes of PACOM's Admiral Harris (<https://www.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/622705/harris-says-north-korea-is-pacoms-biggest-worry-gives-report-on-asia-rebalance/>), even if it appears that the DoD and State departments still currently believe deterrence is robust.

If North Korea is viewed as impossible to deter, it's easier to understand why for some in the U.S., military action now would be better than when Pyongyang can send nuclear ICBMs to cities on the east coast.

"Kim Jong Un has never attacked the U.S.; the lack of war so far is deterrence working, plain and simple," Jackson, however, said about the prospects for containing North Korea's future nuclear threat.

"If McMaster came out and said that we need to update and calibrate deterrence to take into account the new strategic environment we face in Korea, I'd agree," he continued. "But the claim that North Korea can't be deterred is a statement that I have trouble interpreting any other way than as a pretext for war."



(<https://www.nknews.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/170928-D-GY869-262L.jpg>)

Some U.S. officials, like Secretary of Defense Mattis, have fought to temper some of President Trump's more outlandish rhetoric | Photo: U.S. Department of Defense

Green also viewed such remarks about deterrence as “an analytical error; at worst, mendaciousness intended to undermine pursuit of a diplomatic solution... it can most certainly be deterred from both conventional warfare and use of its nuclear weapons.”

Shepard, the policy consultant, said that “without extreme measures, Kim Jong Un cannot be deterred from developing what Pyongyang believes is a strong deterrent.”

“That does not mean that the regime cannot and hasn't been deterred from starting a war,” he continued. “North Korea's leadership is relatively rational, prioritizes survival, and believes a position in North Korean government best provides that.”

“Only if that position of relative power were threatened” would committing an act that would invite either a U.S, Alliance, and possibly UN kinetic response “possibly make sense.”

Yet not all were so sure about the prospects of long-term deterrence with a nuclear-capable North Korea.

“In past discussions with North Korean officials, I have been troubled by their lack of understanding of deterrence theory, by the casualness with which they have discussed nuclear war, and by their lack of appreciation of the implications of the nuclear-related threats they continue to make against the United States,” said Evans Revere.

“Much of this may be posturing, and I continue to believe that Kim Jong Un is a rational actor,” he

continued. "But, it is possible that North Korea may believe its own propaganda and that Pyongyang may actually think it has the U.S. deterred and that this gives the North license to act aggressively against America's allies, or even U.S. territory," a point which could give "considerable reason to be concerned about our ability to deter the regime."

The former U.S. official who requested anonymity warned that though Kim could "probably be deterred from launching an all-out war or nuclear first strike," as North Korean weapons capabilities increase, "the risk of war will likely increase."

"Kim Jong Un cannot be deterred from developing what Pyongyang believes is a strong deterrent."

"Kim may become even more threatening and, as a result, miscalculations and accidents leading to war would be likelier to occur," the official said. "In other words, we can't be complacent."



(https://www.nknews.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/hwasong12_08-1.jpg)

"In past discussions with North Korean officials, I have been troubled by their lack of understanding of deterrence theory" | Photo: Rodong Sinmun

IMMEDIATE INDICATORS?

Despite the increasing noise related to potential U.S. military action, it remains possible that Washington is deliberately attempting to frighten the region into thinking that it is preparing for the worst, in order to bolster sanctions implementation and medium to long-term diplomatic opportunity.

What kind of leading indicators, then, ought those in South Korea worried about the current

direction of travel look out for as far as preparations for actual conflict are concerned?

“U.S. evacuation would definitely be a serious indicator,” said LTG Chun In-bum, the South Korean retired military leader, adding that a change in U.S. Travel Advisory would also be notable in the current environment.

“It is possible that North Korea may believe its own propaganda”

“Mobilization, non-combatant evacuations, significant military asset deployments to Guam, Japan, and ROK, etc,” said Cossa, who has years of experience in track 2 diplomacy with the North Korean side.

Absent of these developments, and with the forthcoming visit of President Trump to the peninsula in November, Shepard said “I find it hard to believe we anticipate military conflict in the near future.”

However, military actions might not necessarily require an evacuation of the southern half of the peninsula, especially since General Mattis in September said options existed (<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-missiles-usa-mattis/mattis-hints-at-military-options-on-north-korea-but-offers-no-details-idUSKCN1BT2IY>) that may not impact the lives of those in the South.

“Many observers think that, if the United States intends to attack North Korea’s nuclear and missile facilities, it will first move more military resources to the region and evacuate U.S. citizens from the Korean peninsula,” said the former State Department official who requested anonymity.

“But if Trump really intends to attack North Korea, it is possible he will judge surprise to be a vital element, in which case he may conclude that it unavoidable to allow the lives of Americans in Korea to be put at risk, to avoid putting American lives on the American homeland at risk.”

“And we can’t exclude the possibility of the North Koreans launching a first attack or of a war getting started by accident, in which cases also there would also be few or no indicators.”

Edited by Oliver Hotham

Featured Image: U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM), file photo

Correction: An editorial error in a quote provided by Kevin Shephard has been corrected (24 October)

Get North Korea headlines delivered to your inbox daily

Subscribe to the NK News 'Daily Update' and get links to must-read stories each morning

Sign Up

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Chad O'Carroll

Chad O'Carroll has written on North Korea since 2010 and writes between London and Seoul.

READ MORE ARTICLES (https://www.nknews.org/content_author

[/chadcarroll/](#)

1 Comment

Sort by **Oldest**



Add a comment...



Sy Gunson ·

The lack of realism in American thinking is obvious from this quote:

"The U.S. lacks a reliable means to convince North Korea that any limited military action isn't just the start of a second Korean war"

So the US is annoyed that North Korea wont simply ignore strike on their SAM installations as if that isn't the thin end of the wedge?

American thinking seems utterly divorced from reality. People don't get it that ANY attack triggers a full nuclear retaliation and that China may well join in. These are the very real consequences of this stupid American militarism

[Like](#) · [Reply](#) · Oct 25, 2017 1:56am · Edited

[Facebook Comments Plugin](#)

RELATED POSTS



(<https://www.nknews.org/2018/02/sanctions-beginning-to-have-impact-in-and-around-north-korea-sources/>)

BY CHAD O'CARROLL (([HTTPS://WWW.NKNEWS.ORG](https://www.nknews.org)))

//CONTENT_AUTHOR/CHADCARROLL//)

February 9th, 2018

New sanctions beginning to have impact in and around N. Korea: sources (<https://www.nknews.org>)



(<https://www.nknews.org/2018/02/kim-jong-uns-public-appearances-in-january-the-leader-lays-low/>)

BY FYODOR TERTITSKIY (([HTTPS://WWW.NKNEWS.ORG](https://www.nknews.org)))

//CONTENT_AUTHOR/FYODOR-TERTITSKIY//)

February 9th, 2018

Kim Jong Un's public appearances in January: the leader lays low (<https://www.nknews.org/2018/02>)

/2018/02/sanctions-beginning-to-have-impact-in-and-around-north-korea-sources/)

The cumulative impact of sanctions are having a mixed impact on a range of indicators...



(<https://www.nknews.org/2018/02/something-old-something-new-something-borrowed-and-pukguksong-2-the-army-day-parade/>)

BY SCOTT LAFOY ([HTTPS://WWW.NKNEWS.ORG/CONTENT_AUTHOR](https://www.nknews.org/content_author)

/SCOTT-LAFOY/)

February 8th, 2018

Something old, something new, something borrowed, and Pukguksong-2: The Army Day Parade (<https://www.nknews.org/2018/02/something-old-something-new-something-borrowed-and-pukguksong-2-the-army-day-parade/>)

The DPRK paraded five formations of ballistic missile systems at its February 8 Army-Building Day...

/kim-jong-uns-public-appearances-in-january-the-leader-lays-low/)

After a busy December which saw the North Korean leadership reemphasize ideological matters and focus on...



(<https://www.nknews.org/2018/02/will-seoul-allow-a-sanctioned-north-korean-official-on-south-korean-soil/>)

BY ([HTTPS://WWW.NKNEWS.ORG/2018/02/WILL-SEOUL-ALLOW-](https://www.nknews.org/2018/02/will-seoul-allow-a-sanctioned-north-korean-official-on-south-korean-soil/)

[A-SANCTIONED-NORTH-KOREAN-OFFICIAL-ON-SOUTH-KOREAN-](https://www.nknews.org/2018/02/will-seoul-allow-a-sanctioned-north-korean-official-on-south-korean-soil/)

[SOIL/](https://www.nknews.org/2018/02/will-seoul-allow-a-sanctioned-north-korean-official-on-south-korean-soil/))

February 7th, 2018

Will Seoul allow a sanctioned North Korean official on South Korean soil? (<https://www.nknews.org/2018/02/will-seoul-allow-a-sanctioned-north-korean-official-on-south-korean-soil/>)

The South Korean Ministry of Unification has announced that three members of the delegation which...



(<https://www.nknews.org/>)

FEATURES

RESOURCES

ABOUT US

CONTACT

PRIVACY

(<https://www.nknews.org/>)

© 2018, [Korea Risk Group \(http://www.korearisk.com\)](http://www.korearisk.com) (NK Consulting Inc.). All Rights Reserved