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COMMENT

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Beyond a war of words? Assessing tensions on the Korean peninsula

An exchange of bellicose rhetoric between North Korea and the US has caused serious global concerns about a possible military conflict. The methodical advances of the North Korean leadership, the limitations of the US's actual policy options, and China's meagre leverage are key determinants in shaping further developments.

Rhetorical volleys between the North Korean official media and US President Donald Trump suggest that a war could erupt at any time. However, while war is possible and some kind of military action cannot be excluded, the situation as a whole is less alarming than implied by media reports. In order to assess the state of play, it is necessary to address the objectives of the North Korean leadership, and the impact of sanctions; the US's actual policy options, specifically in terms of military responses; and China's role and leverage, as well as potential involvement in any military confrontation.

The North Korean leadership under Kim Jong-un has followed a very coherent policy concerning its missile and nuclear programmes. Kim and his regime seem convinced that a nuclear bomb with a vehicle for delivery, turning it into a threat to anyone, particularly the US, is the best guarantee of their survival. It also makes North Korea an actor to be taken seriously. Kim wants the world to recognize North Korea as a nuclear state, and nothing will convince the regime to relinquish what they regard as their only trump card. Neither security guarantees nor a nuclear umbrella provided by another state can change that.

One implication of this is that tightened sanctions, if their aim is

to persuade North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons programme, are doomed to fail. Sanctions will, however, worsen the situation of the population, already – once again – threatened by famine. The suffering of its people has never been a major concern for the North Korean leadership. The regime will continue testing and upgrading its missiles and nuclear devices.

Following US and Japanese reports that North Korea had possibly miniaturized a nuclear warhead and could hit the US mainland, President Trump delivered an unprecedented, provocative, *ex tempore* threat, hinting at powerful military action against the North Korean regime. North Korea responded by threatening to fire missiles towards the waters off Guam. The Kim regime has so far shied away from targeting the US militarily. Firing missiles towards Guam would be interpreted as a hostile act by the US, and would constitute an enormous escalation.

The United States has a broad range of ways it could respond, from traditional military to hybrid means, including sabotage and cyber operations. An all-out US effort to militarily destroy North Korea's nuclear (and bio/chemical) weapons plus delivery systems would, however, have disastrous results, also because the North can immediately retaliate against Seoul and cause

massive casualties. A limited strike could allow Trump to argue that he has fixed the problem, but would obviously come with significant and unpredictable risks. However, unless there is an actual payload that explodes near Guam or other US military units, it seems unlikely that the US would risk direct escalation into a war on the Korean peninsula. Missile interception is an option, but is fraught with risks if it fails.

Finally, China's role and its ability to influence North Korean behaviour should not be exaggerated. China is often depicted as North Korea's only ally, but President Xi Jinping has shown no sympathy towards North Korea, and there is no reason to expect China to uphold its commitments in the Sino-North Korean Mutual Aid and Cooperation Friendship Agreement, which also includes mutual assistance in the event of a military attack. China needs a stable, predictable international environment that helps its economy to grow. North Korea's unwillingness to listen to China's calls to stop endangering stability makes it as big a headache for China as for any other nation.

China sells and donates grain and oil to North Korea, but that does not give Beijing sufficient leverage to solve the issue. On the contrary, China's hands are tied. By stopping all trade and aid deliveries, it risks

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unleashing chaos in North Korea. China's leadership is concerned about the North Korean military, which continues to support the leadership due to the fact that they receive adequate food and fuel. Dissatisfaction within the military could lead to a civil war with disastrous consequences: refugees flooding into China, weapons of mass destruction falling into the wrong hands, and giving the US reason to strengthen its presence in the region.

The *Global Times*, a subsidiary tabloid of the *People's Daily*, published an editorial on August 11th which stated: "China should also make clear that if North Korea launches missiles that threaten US soil first and the US retaliates, China will stay neutral". This, however, should not be read as China giving the US free rein to launch a retaliatory strike. The *Global Times* is used to issuing provocative, highly nationalistic trial balloons in order to gauge reactions from abroad. The tabloid's message is most likely directed towards Pyongyang, warning them that China's patience is wearing thin and that North Korea cannot rely on China's help in the event of an attack. In reality, however, China does not want war on the Korean Peninsula. In a weekend phone call with President Trump, Xi called for

restraint from "concerned parties", distancing China from the two antagonists in a way that can be seen as a warning to the US not to count on China's support for military actions.

The options for China, the US, and the rest of the international community are limited. Right now it appears that North Korea may have won this round, and the world might just have to accept the presence of a new nuclear power.