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War Is Not an Option for Korea

By Christine Ahn
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“Let me be very clear: The policy of strategic patience has ended,” U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson told reporters at a news conference in Seoul, South Korea. “All options are on the table,” Tillerson continued, including “an appropriate response” to any North Korean threat.

The United States and North Korea are like two “accelerating trains coming toward each other,” Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi warned last week. North Korea test-fired four ballistic missiles off the coast of Japan as thousands of South Korean, Japanese, and US troops, backed by warships and warplanes, are currently engaging in massive military exercises, including the deployment of the Navy SEALs that killed Osama Bin Laden.

With no communication other than military posturing, Pyongyang is left to interpret Washington’s maneuvers as preparation for a preemptive strike. Given the political vacuum in South Korea following President Park Geun-hye’s impeachment, all tracks are heading towards one destination: war.

At a Council of Foreign Relations discussion on March 13, Mary Beth Long, a former assistant secretary of defense, advocated for “aggressive movement” given the failure of the Obama administration’s strategic patience, which depended heavily on sanctions to further isolate and foment the collapse of the Kim Jong Un regime.

Yet as hawks call upon President Trump to deal with North Korea's nuclear and missile programs through the use of force, they're undermining the very reason the US military has allegedly been stationed on the Korean peninsula for seven decades: to protect the South Korean people.

Although the fantasy of surgical strikes to topple brutal dictators has long intoxicated American military officials, they've been restrained by the sobering reality of such reckless action. In the 1990s, when President Bill Clinton considered a first strike on North Korea's Yongbyon nuclear reactor, the Pentagon concluded that even limited action would claim a million lives in the first 24 hours – and this was well before Pyongyang possessed nuclear weapons.

President Obama, too, considered surgical strikes targeting Kim Jong UN and weapons sites. But as David Sanger reported in *The New York Times*, obtaining such timely intelligence was nearly impossible and “the risks of missing were tremendous, including renewed war on the Korean peninsula.” Any military action by Washington will undoubtedly trigger a counter-reaction from Pyongyang that could instantly kill a third of the South Korean population.

“North Korea will surely conduct a nuclear attack against South Korea and the US by using all of its various methods of attack such as long-range artillery,” said Suh Choo-suk, a Senior Research Fellow at the Korea Institute for Defense Analyses at a symposium in Tokyo earlier this month. “There is no South Korean leader who thinks the first strike by the US is okay.”

Yet with the political vacuum in South Korea following Park Geun-hye's impeachment, the South Korean foreign minister Yun Byung-se appears to be following Washington's hardline stance that “military deterrence would be one of the pillars.”

It may be the Park administration's last-ditch effort to foment regime collapse before a more progressive administration reverses its hardline policy. The leading candidate to replace Park, Moon Jae-in, is poised to win the May 9 snap elections, barring any surprises. He has promised to visit Pyongyang before Washington, reopen the Kaesong Joint Industrial complex that Park closed last year, and reconsider the installation of THAAD, the US missile defense system Washington deployed ahead of schedule before a progressive administration takes over the Blue House in Seoul. The deployment of THAAD has angered China, which views it as a US surveillance tool, and has dealt a blow to South Korea's economy by boycotting many goods and services.

Perhaps that's why the Trump administration is considering military action now. With a liberal pro-engagement president in South Korea, Washington will have to change its tune from beating the drums for war. Moon isn't a novice either; he was chief of staff to Roh Moo-hyun, the last liberal South Korean president, who called for continuing the sunshine policy towards North Korea and renegotiating wartime operational control away from Washington into Seoul's hands.

If the Trump administration is indeed planning a military first strike, it must consider the 28,500 US soldiers and their families stationed in South Korea, not to mention the tens of thousands more in Okinawa and Guam, which are within striking distance of North Korean missiles. It will be their blood on his hands.

The feasibility of such preemptive strikes hinges, of course, on the accuracy of US intelligence, which the global intelligence firm Stratfor believes is at best questionable. “Though the United States can be reasonably certain of its ability to destroy the nuclear infrastructure in a single strike, it would require an extremely accurate intelligence picture – far beyond what is likely – for Washington to be reasonably certain of having hit and destroyed all available weapons and delivery vehicles.”

The prospect of war on the Korean peninsula is simply inconceivable.

My father’s entire family in Chuncheon, two hours northeast of Seoul, would be among the millions of Korean civilians instantly killed, not to mention all the innocent lives that would be killed in the crossfire. As US intelligence estimates, a seemingly surgical military action could devolve into a regional war that could well draw in Japan, China, and Russia.

When considering the massive destruction of a US military action, it’s clear to the sane and sober that military intervention is not an option. In this perilous hour, diplomacy and engagement should be the only consideration on the table.

Last week, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi made a proposal: “As a first step, North Korea should suspend nuclear activity, and the US and South Korea should also suspend large-scale military drills.” Calling on both sides to de-escalate and return to talks, Yi proposed a dual track of denuclearization and establishing a peace mechanism to resolve concerns of all parties.

Trump, who fashions himself a shrewd businessman, should know a good deal when he sees one – and take it.