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Trump and Xi and Kim: Hot War or Cold Peace?

By Roy Morrison
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Is the world at the brink of war and mass slaughter in Korea? Or will Trump's Asian grand tour be limited to occasional rhetorical flourishes, twitter eruptions, and closing trade deals. President Trump is busy selling weapons to Japan. He will be closing deals with President Xi to sell liquified natural gas and oil to China from planned Gulf Coast LNG terminals and a Texas Permian Basin pipeline. Billions of dollars are on the table to be delivered to U.S. companies by salesperson-in-chief Donald Trump.

Spilling tanker loads of Korean and American blood, at least a rhetorical reckless willingness to do so is snarled again and again in a tough guy pose, good at least for a bump in the polls. "Do not try us," Donald Trump warns North Korea. In Beijing the message is that President Xi must impose more crippling sanctions upon North Korea. Or what?

Popular wisdom is that President Kim, mindful of the lessons of the now deceased Saddam Hussein and Muammar Gaddafi will not give up his nuclear weapons nor stop development of ICBMs capable of reaching the United States.

The Trump administration has frequently called the development of such weapons unacceptable and has indicated that if Korea does not denuclearize, war will come, and if tens of thousands must die, it will not be on American soil. The Homeland is to be spared at all costs.

It's time we looked at the question of North Korea realistically. War will be catastrophic for everyone. President Kim is a dynastic ruler from a family who has clung to power for generations and has every intent to continue to do so. In this sense, his regime is a rational actor repressing opposition, attempting to maintain power at all costs, and seeing nuclear weapons and the threats they enable as a means to accomplish these goals.

We should remember that nuclear deterrence fortunately succeeded in avoiding war between the extravagantly nuclear armed Soviet Union and the U.S. and its allies for decades. North Korea already has a real nuclear arsenal and has possessed the ability for any years to rain nuclear death down on millions in South Koreans including 137,000 American citizens living in /South Korea including soldiers, their families, business people, retirees, and ex-patriots.

Any military attempts by the U.S. to destroy North Korea's nuclear and ICBM capacity would certainly result in a North Korean "conventional" counter attack that may include raining down artillery shells upon Seoul with enormous civilian casualties. According to a military analysis, "If every one of Pyongyang's 300-mm multiple rocket launcher systems were directed against Seoul, their range would be sufficient to rain fire across the city and beyond. A single volley could deliver more than 350 metric tons of explosives across the South Korean capital, roughly the same amount of ordnance dropped by 11 B-52 bombers."

Any Second Korean War will result in enormous civilian and military fatalities. A Second Korean War could escalate into nuclear war with nuclear weapons unleashed against Seoul and Pyongyang, with nuclear attacks on Japan and Guam quite possible. Millions of lives are at stake.

Kim jong un has succeeded in getting the attention of the world. His threats, nuclear explosions and missile tests strengthen his prestige and hold on power. What is called for is careful multilateral diplomacy, containment, a sanction regime that encourages North Korea to change policies, and steps toward reducing the chance of war in Korea. Avoiding a Second Korean war means treating North Korea as a dangerous, tyrannical regime to be constrained by the enormous economic and military power surrounding it on all sides.

War in Korea would be catastrophic. A cold peace is infinitely better than a hot war.